Losing Interest

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Chapter One: A Kinetic Notion (Introduction)

During campaign speeches leading up to the 2016 US presidential election, a prominent senator championed the need to “create a growing and vibrant economy” and on foreign policy suggested that “the European community has got to work with Greece to create economic growth.” Such innocuous language could come from nearly any elected official. Such bipartisan sentiments do not register objections from any corner of the political landscape. These words are so inoffensive that they’re almost meaningless. It’s almost difficult to hear them they are so banal and perfunctory.

These snippets were spoken by Senator Bernie Sanders during his first presidential run. This is probably not an altogether powerful revelation. Despite being the most outspoken opponent of profit-first policies during his tenure in office, despite consistently advocating for regulations on unbridled corporate profits, despite leading efforts to aggressively tax the most inequitable accumulators of wealth, despite prioritizing worker dignity over GDP, despite all this, Bernie Sanders still believes that economic growth is a goal the world should pursue.

That a self-identifying democratic-socialist affirms the virtue of economic growth is not shocking. It is inconceivable that a politician could win an election in the US today running on a platform of halting economic growth or drawing down economic output. “Growth is often treated as an arbiter of political success. Few leaders dare to challenge GDP growth.”[1] A no-growth policy would entail less work, less private property, less vacations, less movies, less cars, less furniture, and less restaurants. And less is nearly unanimously agreed to be worse.[2] When studying archaic societies like the

Classic Period Maya that halted construction of pyramids, abandoned urban centers, and began pursuing a less resource-intensive lifestyle, archaeologists say such societies "collapsed."[3] A society is considered to have failed if it transitions to exploiting fewer resources.

This book investigates the remarkable consensus regarding the presumed benefits of economic growth. The goal within is to illuminate the history of the normalization of economic growth, particularly through the simple financial tool called interest. Economic growth was not always normal, expected, or pursued. Over the past few centuries, though, it has become the primary goal of nearly every governing body on the planet. This change co-occurred with the gradual legalization of charging and disbursing interest in Europe since the fifteenth century. Nearly every society has had taboos restricting interest (or interest's nonmonetary equivalents) that prevented runaway economic growth. Such restrictions broke down in European Christendom over the last few centuries. This book explains how and why.

How do abject and self-destructive practices become normal? Most agree that honesty, generosity, and empathy are virtuous. Yet the perpetual economic growth the world has endured these past few centuries has been built upon mass murder, theft, and deception. How has the world normalized a form of social organization that is so directly incompatible with its professed values? This book investigates this history, highlighting the trail of violence and injustice wrought by the valorization and pursuit of economic growth.

The aim of this book is "very simple: it is nothing more than to think about what we are doing."[4] As opposed to accepting that the growth of wealth is an inherent and unassailable good, perhaps we can think a little harder about what it takes to grow wealth and question if all this wealth is *worth* the cost.[5] This book takes seriously the idea that the drawbacks of economic growth outweigh any circumstantial benefits. Bringing a sudden halt to economic growth is not an easy sell, so, short of this, it is hoped this book can at least make economic growth a bit more controversial.

Epitomizing dominant economic perspectives, Richard Landes suggests historians have difficulty understanding the lack of economic growth in the Middle Ages because they take growth for granted. “When it’s not there . . . we either find reasons why it didn’t happen or imagine that, contrary to impressions, it did happen . . . we assume that economic growth is natural, and that as soon as conditions permit, it appears.”[6] Herein, I pulverize this assumption, showing that economic growth is not natural or unnatural. Economic growth is a choice motivated by certain values, particularly the valuing of egoistic individualism over social well-being.

In many regards the task before this book resembles Angela Davis’s discussion of prison abolition in the US. “The prison is considered so ‘natural’ that it is extremely hard to imagine life without it. . . . The prison has become a key ingredient of our common sense. It is there, all around us. We do not question whether it should exist. It has become so much a part of our lives that it requires a great feat of the imagination to envision life beyond the prison.”[7] “The prison” could be seamlessly replaced with “economic growth” in this quote. As Davis highlights, the work of denaturalization is daunting.

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Today’s dominant economic behavior (how we exchange and distribute resources) is predicated on the perpetual growth of wealth, and, when that growth shows signs of letting up, it induces widespread distress for millions in the form of depressions and recessions. However, this is not a compelling argument for the benefits of economic growth. Rather, it is like paying off the mafia. We have an infrastructural gun to our heads threatening to pull the trigger if we stop producing and buying kitchen appliances. We can continue to oblige this figurative assailant until we commodify every inch of the solar system, or we can work together to disarm this systemic tormentor.

Stretching this violent metaphor further, the “gun to our head” is interest. Interest makes it so that if we don’t grow our wealth, we

face privation. No development has been more significant in shaping today's socioeconomic circumstances than the legalization of charging interest in Europe over the past few centuries. From the dissolution of the Western Roman Empire (roughly 476) to the dissolution of ecclesiastic authority across Napoleonic Europe (roughly 1807), charging interest at any rate was, if not illegal, then scandalous and sinful. This book offers a deep interrogation of the history and function of interest, including the multiple shifts in social perception of the concept over the millennia.

I draw from the fields of history, theology, anthropology, economics, and philosophy to make two overarching arguments: 1) the pursuit of perpetually accelerating economic growth is unavoidably violent, exploitative, and ecocidal (if not genocidal and suicidal); 2) the pursuit of economic growth is mandated and normalized through interest. Today it is normal to grow wealth, and it is normal to let one billion people go hungry.[8] I suggest the pursuit of the former causes the latter. From sixteenth-century Spanish monasteries to contemporary Indian farms, I interrogate the formation and perpetuation of beliefs, values, and traditions that support the peculiar idea that economic growth is beneficial.

The focus here is primarily on the Eurowestern sphere. This "zone of interest" has proven least capable of living without economic growth. Polities within this sphere unleashed the never-ending (and accelerating) conversion of the world's resources into commodities. While it would certainly be fascinating to look at the unique ways that economic growth became normalized in Nigeria, Russia, or China, the search here is for the origins of this phenomenon.

Each of the following chapters tells and retells the economic history of the previous six centuries (roughly 1400 to today) through a different lens: a) the normalization of interest; b) banking and privatization; c) insurance and risk; d) stock markets and investing; and e) the invention of "the future" in economic thought. The line between banking, insurance, and the stock market is rather blurry today, intentionally so. The collusion of these domains over the years has been key to large-scale transfers of wealth from peasant to aristocrat (from the many to the few). These sectors are essentially

three sides of the same coin. When this oddly shaped coin is brandished by any single entity (CitiGroup, for example), it is incredibly dangerous. It basically allows financial institutions the power to make riskless investments.[9] I parse the conceptual divides between these three domains to illustrate how they work together to perpetuate widespread grief. Each chapter discusses particularly grim episodes, demonstrating that seemingly neutral fiscal pursuits are inescapably malignant.

This cycling through history is meant to haunt: “repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what’s been in your blind spot comes into view.”[10] The world built from Enlightenment colonialism needs an exorcism. While seventeenth-century revolts in England may seem incongruous with the rise of life insurance, this interlacing of atrocity with banality is meant to keep the reader from getting too comfortable. To encourage this unsettling, I occasionally use iconoclastic or sardonic language to de-normalize the taken-for-granted. At its most pretentious, this book fuses the joyful disrespect of a drag culture “reading” with Reinhart Koselleck’s search for the “pathogenesis” of modern society.[11]

In the remainder of this chapter, I unpack key concepts discussed throughout the book, specifically the notions of interest, economy, growth, and normalization. This is followed by a concise itemization of reasons that economic growth might be considered detrimental, delusional, or sociopathic. Finally, I discuss the emerging “degrowth” movement and its capacity to challenge never-ending wealth accumulation.

Writing in-between, above, and below several unfolding political, economic, linguistic, and theological spheres, Dante speaks with astute clarity to the prevailing sentiment of a rapidly financializing Florence in the early fourteenth century: “And what imperils and destroys cities, territories, and individuals day by day more than the accumulation of wealth. . . . Such an accumulation uncovers new desires which cannot be satiated without causing injury to someone. What else were . . . Canon Law and Civil Law intended to curb if not

the surge of greed brought about by the amassing of wealth?”[12]

This book interrogates why the imperiling and destroying of cities by the accumulation of wealth lamented by Dante has become not only normal but also celebrated over the past seven centuries.

Interest

It is a bit stunning to learn that the financial concept interest has been the subject of debate for over four thousand years. For as long as there’s been a written record, there’s been discussion of how to regulate interest. As long as there’s been interest, it has been recognized as a potentially harmful practice. This history is the entire focus of chapter 2, so I will only mention here that, until the twentieth century, charging a fee for lending wealth had been a concern for all past centers of wealth accumulation, legally, theologically, and morally. Today, however, interest is so normalized that we don’t even see it—it’s not interesting. How did we lose *interest* in interest, and is it possible to *lose* interest (get rid of the financial practice, lose it, like a bad habit)?

Restrictions or bans on interest have been one means of preventing violent runaway economic growth. This is not necessarily because interest creates growth but instead because it *mandates* growth (i.e., devalues stagnant wealth) and creates socially disharmonious inequality. For the last century there has been comparatively little discussion about the merit of interest. This anomaly is compelling due to its overlap with the greatest hundred years of wealth accumulation the planet has ever seen. That is, as worries about the immorality of interest decline, economic growth increases. Less morality, more wealth.

Nineteenth-century Austrian economist Eugen Böhm-Bawerk illuminates the peculiarity of the simple financial tool: “[Interest] flows into the capitalist without ever exhausting the capital from which it comes, and therefore without any necessary limit to its continuance. It is . . . capable of everlasting life . . . interest, as a whole, presents

the remarkable picture of a lifeless thing producing an everlasting and inexhaustible supply of goods."[13] This illusion of inexhaustibility is what authorizes capitalism's pursuit of endless exploitation.

Nearly all groups of people this planet has ever hosted have explicitly or implicitly prevented perpetual asymmetrical wealth accumulation (with the partial exception of a handful of scattered empires). The gradual acceptance of interest in Europe over the past six centuries broke down traditional social restrictions on runaway wealth accumulation (and inequality). Economic historians repeatedly interpret prohibitions on interest as naive or ignorant, as opposed to ethical or moral. Capitalized scholars have confused morality with ignorance. Unleashing interest set uncontrollable growth in motion and its attendant colonial violence. David Graeber argues the reification of interest (the belief that it is inevitable) is the cause of our acceptance of slavery, sexual exploitation, and other degrading treatment.[14]

It may be pointed out that many societies have engaged in interest-based lending without experiencing perpetual economic growth. True, not every nation or institution that lends at interest experiences economic growth, but the point is that they are forced to try. Interest alone doesn't grow wealth; it makes growth necessary to prevent impoverishment. Interest creates as much poverty as it does wealth. Failure to grow wealth in an interest-based economy induces poverty. It has not always been the case that stagnant wealth induced poverty. In non-capitalized societies you don't need to grow your wealth to avoid impoverishment.

Economy

"There was no economy before the twentieth century."[15] What exactly is growing when we speak of economic growth? In this ubiquitous phrase, "economic" is often simply a synonym for "wealth." It's not necessary to complicate the matter much more than this, but here I offer a brief overview of the broader concept of economy. While there

have always been methods, strategies, and ideologies concerning the distribution of resources, “the economy” wasn’t much discussed prior to the nineteenth century. Despite millennia of discussions on tax, trade, lending, and investment, the idea of “the economy of France” (for example) would have been anachronistic prior to 1750. The economy, like so many of our common knowledge constructs today (e.g., geology, psychology, anthropology) was born alongside the colonial-industrial expansion of wealth.[16]

Key to the rise of the economy (as a concept) was the emergence of economists. Alongside Adam Smith, other notable forerunners include Thomas Malthus (b. 1766), Jean-Baptiste Say (b. 1767), David Ricardo (b. 1772), Jean Charles de Sismondi (b. 1773), John MacCulloch (b. 1773), Julius von Kirchmann (b. 1802), Johann Rodbertus (b. 1805), John Stuart Mill (b. 1806), Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (b. 1809), and of course Karl Marx (b. 1818). Since its emergence, economic thought and thinking, argues philosopher André Gorz, has come to dominate all forms of rationality and reason. According to Gorz, modern capitalizing populations perceive and interpret the world primarily through the categories and concepts of economics, as a cost-benefit analysis, transactions, and competitions. Prior to the dominance of economic reason, Gorz suggests, there was a plurality of reasoning—moral reasoning, religious reasoning, familial reasoning, anecdotal reasoning, intuitive reasoning. Now all reasoning is economic reasoning.[17]

Gorz avoids distinguishing between “economic reasoning” in general and a more specific “capitalized reasoning,” but I would suggest that what he sees as the post-industrial hegemony of economic reason could more specifically be thought of as capitalized reasoning. What Gorz considers “economic reasoning” is actually “economic growth reasoning.” That Gorz conflates economic reasoning with capitalized reasoning evinces the normalization of the idea that economies are supposed to grow. Reasoning about resource distribution has not always-and everywhere foregrounded competition, scarcity, and growth.

If there are different types of economic reasoning, are there different types of economy? If “capitalized reasoning” is a subset of

“economic reasoning,” may we think of capitalism as one of many types of economy? The idea of economy types suggests that every group or nation must select and execute an economic program. But capitalism isn’t like software you install into your nation. The perennial question, “what do you propose to replace capitalism with?” assumes every society must run on some kind of economic platform—you have to swap out capitalism for socialism like you switch from a PC to a Mac. But why must capitalism be replaced with anything?

Historians and economists have struggled to see outside “systems” such as capitalism or feudalism.[18] There are historical blinders to the possibility of worlds outside of economic systems. Many historians fail to consider the existence or even possibility of non-standardized commons-based economies, let alone their supremacy for nearly a thousand years in Europe (circa 500 to 1500 CE). The easy answer to the misguided riddle “What do you replace capitalism with?” is *nothing*. You just stop doing it. Why would you need to replace the pursuit of economic growth?

There is really only one economy today. This is not an endorsement of Margaret Thatcher’s “There is no alternative” but rather a somewhat tautological observation. Regardless of how regulated or privatized or centrally planned a nation’s economic activity is, every nation today is participating in a shared global market in which resources are commonly valuated (not incidentally in US dollars). I would argue alongside Deleuze and Guattari that ostensibly socialist or communist polities like the former Soviet Union should be considered variants of capitalism—“there is but one centered world market, the capitalist one, in which even the so-called socialist countries participate.”[19] Also, as has been pointed out by Indigenous communities, “Capitalism or socialism is extractive, consumerist, developmentalist. In this sense they are the same.”[20]

The resources of Cuba, for example, are valued within this market despite Cuba having arrived at the political decision not to participate in the global economic market. This means that Cuba could (and does) have a distinct internal and external economy. Its “internal” economy is on par with any high-GDP country, offering first-rate

education, health care, arts, and athletics, but its “external” economy is extremely impoverished. Any commodities that must be valued against the global market can be exorbitantly expensive in Cuba.[21]

Aside from a few small pockets of off-grid self-sustainers, everyone participates in the global capitalized economy. This hegemony is very much militarily enforced. The postwar years were defined by a vigilant American-led effort to disempower and impoverish any groups striving to practice economic values that differed from those of Western capitalism. The very hint that a nation or minority group might try to opt out of the globally dominant economy was regularly met with militarized confrontation, either in the form of war (e.g., Vietnam), regime change (e.g., Chile), or crippling sanctions (Cuba and Venezuela). States either choose to grow or are “indirectly forced to by the dynamics of geopolitical competition.”[22]

There’s no more ironic misnomer than George Kennan’s Cold War policy of “containing” communism as justification for US intervention in the political economy of nearly *every* nation since 1945. It is not communism that autonomously spreads but instead perpetually growing Western capitalism. “Capitalism must therefore always and everywhere fight a battle of annihilation against every historical form of natural economy that it encounters.”[23] The containment of communism could more properly be described as the militarized enforcement of capitalism. “Capital must begin by planning for the systematic destruction and annihilation of all the non-capitalist social units which obstruct its development . . . [Capitalism] is invariably accompanied by a growing militarism.”[24]

While religious freedom is held up by many polities as a pinnacle virtue, there is absolutely no concurrent valorization of economic freedom today. Groups seeking to form and practice a heterodox economic sect will most likely be arrested or starve. There is only one official and legal economy today.

Groups are always going to exchange and distribute resources. Just as anthropologist Margaret Mead defined family as *the group that rears the children*, an economy could be defined as *the group with whom you share or exchange* (which for most of us today is a

group of roughly seven billion). The idea that one must adhere to capitalist rules of exchange or socialist rules of exchange or communist or hunter-gatherer or feudal or mercantilist rules of exchange bespeaks a great poverty of imagination.

While those who ask what we would replace capitalism with may be antagonistically goading us into saying “socialism” or “communism” in order to point out the totalitarian atrocities of Stalin or Zedong, capitalism doesn’t need to be *replaced*. Just stop. Bringing a halt to the pursuit of perpetual economic growth will not stop people from exchanging resources. If we broke up monopolistic corporations, banned interest-bearing financial products, and nationalized banks, people would not stop exchanging resources. Malware doesn’t need to be replaced. The delusional belief that wealth can grow forever doesn’t need to be replaced. It can be discarded. Ustaoglu and İncekara write “those that argue that interest does irreparable damage to the social life have no clue of how to replace interest.”[25] Exactly! A *better* mechanism for transferring wealth from the poor to the rich than interest is inconceivable. This book offers no alternatives to capitalization, interest, or inequitable transfers of wealth but simply suggests that we do not need to transfer wealth from the poor to the rich.

Some may say it is *unrealistic* to consider a world without economic growth. I challenge this “capitalist realism” throughout the book, so now I will just point out that perpetual economic growth (like perpetual motion) is outlawed by the most vetted scientific theories. While Albert Einstein isn’t known for his economic thoughts, he wrote after World War II, “The economic anarchy of capitalist society as it exists today is, in my opinion, the real source of evil.”[26] Smart people (like Einstein) know you cannot perpetually grow wealth without unacceptable levels of violence, but amplifying this position faces significant opposition. The goal within is to encourage “resisting the epistemic pull of capital.”[27]

Growth

Around 1800 global GDP reached $1 trillion. Sometime in the 2010s the global GDP passed $100 trillion. In 2022 it was $130 trillion. With merely linear growth this number will reach $200 trillion by 2050.[28] It took about 200 years to go from $1 trillion to $100 trillion in annual global GDP. If it takes only forty years to double again, this suggests we are approaching a singularity of economic growth, in which global GDP must double every few years. This is the terrifying violence of compound growth rates.

"For the entire span of the 'American Century,' growth has been the most important policy goal of governments of all stripes around the world."[29] The economy grows. It is a growing machine. Is growth good? In terms of emotional intelligence, yes. In terms of cancer cells, no.

Growth is a kinetic notion. To pursue growth is to pursue perpetual motion, perpetual alteration of present circumstances. Since the legalization of interest (see chapter 2), there is no such thing as static wealth. To believe in growth is to believe in constant flux. It is to resign oneself to perpetual instability. Some people find instability uncomfortable and attempt to stabilize their lives to reduce uncertainty. Such efforts are futile when living in a society organized around perpetual growth.

Under the current regime, if one's wealth is not growing, it is declining. Five hundred dollars cash in a shoebox under the bed is slowly losing value. The average rate of annual global economic growth over the past two hundred years has been around 3 percent (compounded). Thus, if your wealth doesn't grow at this rate annually, you become poorer, relatively. The less-than-1-percent annual interest disbursement I receive on my savings account means my wealth is "underperforming" (i.e., losing value relative to Bill Gates's wealth).[30]

To advocate for growth is to advocate for *perpetual* growth. No one proposes finite growth. No one campaigns on twenty years of growth or six months of growth followed by economic stasis. Implicitly, then, by championing economic growth, its advocates promote a perpetual shifting of wealth from the present to the future; promote the extraction and exploitation of present resources to

construct future profits.

Growth must occur in space and *time*. Many geographers have charted the spatial repercussions of the growth of wealth.[31] Whether it be the gentrification of Brooklyn neighborhoods, the privatization of South American utilities, the homogenization of international chain stores, or space tourism, the profitization of spaces must continue to expand. Growth also requires a time into which it may grow—the future. To organize a society around perpetual growth is to prioritize future profits over present well-being (see chapter 6). Capitalism has a future (by definition), but does it have a present?

There is a common belief that the environmentally exploitative practices of multinational corporations are destroying the planet's future. No. They are destroying the planet's present with the aim of making the future wealthier. They are transferring the wealth and resources of those alive today to hypothetical residents of the future. The problem (even for the wealthy) is that no one lives in the future. Under the paradigm of perpetual growth, we never reach the future for which we are accumulating so much wealth.

Today's normalized practice of forever growth is not the economy envisioned by early champions of capitalized social relations. Adam Smith, Thomas Malthus, and David Ricardo did not propose or expect an economy based on never-ending asymmetrical accumulation of wealth. Malthus was famously alarmed by the prospect, pointing out that some poor people might starve to death if growth rates continued at the early industrial pace. He was absolutely correct. Approximately forty million people in India and China starved to death in the last half of the nineteenth century in order to grow the British economy.[32]

Malthus was right that unbridled growth is impossible without millions of people starving to death. Malthus was wrong to "transform the fact of low wages into a natural law," allowing the under-waged to die. Malthus clearly saw the contradictions of capital, but rather than condemn them, "he raise[d] them quite unmercifully to the status of a natural law and assert[ed] their absolute sanctity."[33]

The above trio of political economists advocated for capitalization because they didn't understand it. Malthus advocated for equilibrium,

Ricardo denied the necessity of expanding the market, and Smith believed in fixed levels of investment. If they had known they were championing an economic system that required the never-ending exploitation of increasingly more and more resources, they might have espoused different views. Understandably, accelerating growth forever seemed nonsensical to first-wave political economists. “Ricardo . . . consistently denies the necessity for an expansion of the market to accompany the expansion of production and the growth of capital.”[34]

While Smith, Malthus, and Ricardo did not agree on all aspects of economics, they all emphasized free markets, government deregulation, private property, and alienated labor—the basic tenets of classical liberalism.[35] There’s no shortage of definitions for capitalism, but could it simply be said that capitalism is the belief in capital? It’s worth noting that early political economists (Smith, Malthus, Ricardo, as well as Marx) did not write of “capitalism.” They wrote of “capital” and “capitalists,” but the use of capital by capitalists did not become the ideology “capitalism” until the 1860s.[36] A sampling of dictionaries defines capital as: “wealth used in the production or accumulation of more wealth” and “accumulated goods devoted to the production of other goods; accumulated possessions calculated to bring in income.” Synthesizing and simplifying these sentiments, *capital* refers to *excess used to grow itself* (Marx might use the word “surplus” instead of “excess”).

Is capitalism then simply *the belief in and pursuit of (never-ending) excessive wealth*? For Immanuel Wallerstein, indeed, capitalism is simply constant accumulation and endless economic growth.[37] Above any definitions of capitalism pertaining to free markets, alienated labor, or private ownership (which might more correctly be referred to as liberalism), the pursuit of perpetual economic growth seems to transcend the slight policy variations between capitalizing nations. Every group creates excess, waste, and unnecessary byproducts. Many ethnographically observed groups destroy their excess or redistribute it (e.g., ceremonial destruction among Indigenous communities in the Pacific Northwest or gifting systems in Melanesia). Capitalized groups use their excess to make more

excess; use their unnecessary cultural byproducts to make more unnecessary cultural byproducts.

The growth of wealth has become so naturalized that many have come to believe it is the very purpose of economic activity (production, exchange, and consumption) to generate growth. For these people there is no such thing as an economy that isn't pursuing growth. For some, the word "growth" is synonymous with the word "improvement." There is the self-help incantation to "grow as a person," to constantly pursue personal growth. Thus, to avoid confusion, some might suggest the word "accumulation" is a better fit than "growth" for the purposes of this book.

While the "accumulation of wealth" might have a darker connation than the "growth of wealth," my goal is to unsettle normalized perceptions. As such, I want to attempt to detach "growth" from any innate positive connotations, so when we hear phrases like "economic growth" we don't let them slide past as suggesting "economic improvement." The goal is to uproot any normalized assumption that increasing the amount of wealth created by capitalized humans is beneficial.

Normalization

The problem with normalized ideas is that they are difficult to detect and unseat. To be normal is to be invisible. Normal ideas appear natural. To make something seem natural is to make it seem inevitable, like it is "supposed to be." Normalization may occur through biologization. If we confuse social characteristics with biological ones, they seem to be beyond the capricious whims of culture. Describing "greed" or "competitiveness" as natural biological facts contributes to the normalization of neoliberal market democracy.

Normalization also occurs through universalization—making the behaviors of one group of people appear common to every group. Interpreting the behaviors and motivations of archaic populations, for

example, through the normalized values of modern populations is one such anachronistic mistake. Among early social scientists Freud is often guilty of this, developing his paradigm of consciousness from behaviors of war-hungry Europeans. He writes, for example, “the tendency to aggression is an innate, independent, instinctual disposition in man.”[38] There’s no evidence to suggest people tend toward aggression more than cooperation or affection.

Normality is often teleological, implying that our current world was inevitable, had to be this way, is part of a trajectory with a beginning and end. Susan Paulson writes of the need to liberate “us from the fiction that human behaviors currently instrumental to growth are biologically determined universals.”[39] Some even suggest that “economic growth has become the secular religion of advancing industrial societies.”[40]

The total normalization of economic growth is evident in the writing of prominent early-twentieth-century thinkers John Maynard Keynes and Ludwig von Mises. While they offer diametrically opposed economic philosophies, they concur on the assumption that economies are supposed to grow. Mises, writing of humans in general, insists “they are of the opinion that more food, clothing, and the like, is better than less.”[41] Keynes insists that for the “greater part of recorded history there was no . . . progress and invention,” thus normalizing contemporary notions of inevitable progress.[42] The “preoccupation with economic growth is arguably the last remnant of an eighteenth-century faith in progress.”[43]

Mises goes further, psychotically dehumanizing those who do not venerate economic growth. Regarding those that question the universal benevolence of economic growth, Mises suggests the social sciences “can say nothing about plant-like beings living with no thought of tomorrow, whom we can scarcely consider as human.”[44] This dehumanization of opposing ideologies is foundational to genocidal violence. Mises’s work reifies/deifies classical liberalism (deregulated individualism). He writes as though liberalism isn’t even an idea; it is simply a scientific fact: “To the man who adopts the scientific method in reflecting upon the problems of human action, liberalism must appear as the only policy that can

lead to lasting well-being for himself, his friends, and his loved one. . . . Only one who does not want to achieve such ends as life, health, and prosperity for himself, his friends, and those he loves, only one who prefers sickness, misery, and suffering may reject the reasoning of liberalism. . . . Liberalism has nothing to do with world views, metaphysics, or value judgments."[45]

Many economic histories project the normalization of economic growth onto the past. Discussing thirteenth-century economic ideas, Charles Geisst puzzles that "what is not clear is how wealth was to be accumulated," demonstrating the difficulty of imagining life without wealth accumulation.[46] Discussing the lunacy of prohibitions on charging interest, he writes, "An outright church ban on loans would have meant a ban on . . . economic growth itself"—a possibility dismissed as absurd.[47] Modern writers consistently puzzle at the strangeness of medieval writing on interest restrictions. Why and how did it become so *strange* (abnormal) to discuss moral concerns regarding economic activity?

Keynes performs a reverse operation, projecting forward a future that must necessarily not pursue economic growth (i.e., he knows perpetual economic growth is impossible). "When the accumulation of wealth is no longer of high social importance, there will be great changes in the code of morals" and love of money will be treated as "semi-criminal, semi-pathological propensities which one hands over with a shudder to the specialists in mental disease."[48] Either in retrojections or projections, the present moment is portrayed as exempt from contemplations of the ethical implications of economic growth.

Normalization is also frequently the result of simplistic, reductionist thinking, as John Stuart Mill admits: "Political Economy considers mankind as occupied solely in acquiring and consuming wealth, and aims at showing what is the course of action into which mankind . . . would be impelled if that motive [the desire of wealth] . . . were absolute ruler of all their actions. . . . All these operations, though many of them are really the result of a plurality of motives, are considered . . . as flowing solely from the desire of wealth."[49]

A common mistake among scholars and the public is to naturalize

high rates of growth based on the unprecedented economic expansion from 1945 to 1970. Eminent philosopher John Rawls is guilty of such carelessness: “What Rawls presented as facts of moral psychology were often extrapolations based on the experience of the postwar boom.”[50] The uninterrupted Eurowestern growth rates at that time (around 6 percent annually) were a result of rebuilding war-devastated regions. Far from being natural, this period was highly anomalous. There have been consistent economic crises every ten years since about 1750.[51] By no means is the pursuit of excess wealth a universal characteristic; “there is no universal tendency to accumulate capital by lending in a self-expanding process.”[52]

De-normalization can be incredibly difficult. Despite the copious evidence collected and disseminated over the past fifty years demonstrating the negative environmental and social impacts of unending economic growth, “nearly every instance of government and business continues to promise and to prioritize more economic growth.”[53] Susan Paulson explains this impasse. “Actors who are privileged by today’s status quo—and even many who are exploited or marginalized—protest that it is neither ethical nor feasible to try to change human behavior or attitudes: ‘You’re never going to convince people to produce and consume less!’ Degrowth . . . would force unwilling victims to sacrifice their God-given freedoms and to betray innate self-interests. Growth, in contrast, is perceived as apolitical and impartial; modern markets . . . appear as timeless mechanisms through which all humans freely organize.”[54]

While former national security adviser John Bolton is not a renowned economic expert, his sentiment here is representative of common attitudes in the US: “Capitalism is about freedom. Capitalism isn’t some philosophy that’s imposed from outside. Capitalism is what aboriginal peoples all around the world did; some grew food, some did other things. They exchanged products. This is the way people lived.”[55] This is a wildly inaccurate. Bolton has confused a system of exchange based on perpetual growth (capitalism) with *any* exchange at all. This naturalization of capitalism presumes some human inclination to pursue wealth accumulation, but there is no such “natural” tendency. Some

societies value wealth accumulation, some do not.

David Graeber and David Wengrow offer compelling insights on the velocity of normalization.[56] When looking at long-term evidence, normalization and de-normalization appear to be fairly rapid processes, sometimes occurring within a generation or less. However, the idea has been normalized that the current status quo has deeply rooted immutable origins—ironic for an economy advertising perpetual novelty. This is a result of placing ourselves within the concept of "history" (see chapter 6). Given the anthropological evidence, it appears that flexibility and creativity in social organization have been more common than not among human groups. To be clear, "normality" itself isn't problematic. It is when we forget that normality is socially negotiable that we encounter violent reification.

Change often faces resistance until the new practice or condition becomes normalized. Resistance fades upon normalization. This is the case with capitalized social relations. They are resisted strongly everywhere until they are normalized (usually violently). Once ideas and conditions become normalized, resistance to them seems absurd, pointless, ignorant, or counterproductive. This describes current feelings toward interest-based banking—alternatives seem delusional or devastating.

Potential Side Effects

To be sure, when Bernie Sanders speaks of economic growth, he usually appends a qualifier such as "sustainable." Sanders frequently cites the "Nordic model" of economics as an example of this more equitable growth. With their high unionization rates, free health care and education, comprehensive social safety nets, and large public sectors, the economies of Denmark and Sweden still grew about 2 percent for most of the 2010s (with the world average holding steady around 3 percent). But even this Nordic growth can hardly be considered sustainable or equitable. The idea of sustainably and

equitably pursuing perpetually accelerating asymmetrical economic growth is nonsensical at best and violently misguided at worst. The gentler Nordic growth still presumes endless exploitability of people and resources.

The past two decades have seen a surge in popular and academic condemnations of the economic status quo. Following the 2008 financial collapse there has been increased awareness of the indelible structural inequalities of the global economy. In the US today, more than at any point since the 1930s, critiques of capitalism are gaining traction. “The multi-faceted crisis confronting humanity—as manifested in the gap between material welfare . . . massive poverty and injustice, ecological destruction and so on—reflects that the current financial system is not really working.”[57]

Within this rising suspicion of capitalism, however, explicit critiques of economic growth remain outside the mainstream. Several books and articles have critically pointed out the ecological and social damage caused by the growth imperative, and several authors have suggested potential solutions.[58] Yet these works don’t seem to have punctured the popular idea that wealth is supposed to grow. This book tries a different approach, tracing and uncovering how economic growth became normal in the hope of breaking its hold over the imagination.

As has been forcefully illustrated over the past two decades, perhaps the most pressing drawback of perpetual economic growth is the environmental impact.[59] Continuously generating wealth requires perpetually increasing production, consumption, and disposal. As of today, there is no conceivable manner of accomplishing this without rendering planetary ecosystems increasingly uninhabitable for today’s flora and fauna (ourselves included). The rhetoric of “decoupling” economic growth from resource degradation has repeatedly been shown to be impossible.[60] Ecomodernist hopes of a technological salvation fail to appreciate that increases in efficiency only increase consumption under the current economic paradigm (the Jevons paradox).

It is not fossil fuel emissions, mountaintop removal, or ocean acidification that pose the direst threat to the future habitability of the

planet but rather the unchecked pursuit of economic growth. Perpetual economic growth is incompatible with the sustainable management of resources. As many European nations have leveled off (but not decreased) their CO_2 output, there have been concurrent rises in CO_2 output in nations with growing industrial and middle-class lifestyles (e.g., China, India, Nigeria). That is, increased Nordic "sustainability" has been procured through the outsourcing of noxious emissions to the colonized world. In considering potential avenues for economic growth, Larry Summers famously referred to Africa as "under-polluted" during his tenure as chief economist at the World Bank.

The copious producing, buying, selling, consuming, and disposing of goods is environmentally problematic. Mass production *mandates* ecological transformation (deforestation, habitat loss, release of CO_2). The imperative to grow wealth *mandates* mass production. Lending at interest *mandates* perpetual economic growth. The causal chain may be long, but it is straight: interest drives environmental destruction. If wealth didn't lose value when stagnant, it wouldn't be necessary to constantly generate more of it, and environmentally destructive mass production wouldn't be necessary. Overconsumption becomes necessary to avoid devaluation.

If one is not swayed by the environmental drawbacks of economic growth, perhaps the systematic production of inequality is more compelling. The economic growth of the past two centuries has been highly asymmetrical. This is not accidental. If everyone holds wealth in a savings account gathering 5 percent annual percentage yield (APY) (the financially savvy have much higher yields and the financially underprivileged may have smaller yields), then the wealth of someone with $100,000 grows faster than someone with $1,000. This is the inextricable math of capitalism's asymmetrical growth. The wealth of the rich grows faster and greater than the wealth of the poor, the effect of which is to make the wealth of the not-rich increasingly worth less. "The main factor responsible for poverty . . . must be sought precisely where it was claimed the solution was to be found—that is, in the process of growth."[61]

The growth of wealth does not reduce poverty. We've been growing wealth exponentially for two hundred years, and nearly a billion people live in extreme poverty. Aside from classic Marxist observations regarding the necessity of large pools of laboring poor for profit maximization, the sheer math of today's growth mandates the transformation of human populations into resources from which wealth can be continuously extracted. The repercussion of inequality is persistent antagonism and social disharmony. Indeed, studies find that the most unequal societies are the most unhappy.[62]

If this inequality is not troubling, perhaps systemic starvation is a more persuasive cause. Critical to the growth of wealth is the privatization of land (private property)—the profitization of space through the extraction of rents or resources. This private ownership of land makes it impossible for millions of people today to legally feed themselves. The militarized enforcement of private property around the globe, kicked off by the English enclosures, has transformed agricultural output from food into commodities. For the billion or so who have little access to money, privatization of land has meant the near impossibility of producing non-commodified food (food for consumption, as opposed to exchange). Industrial agriculture is "a system that produces enough calories for every person in the world while leaving nearly one billion hungry and malnourished."[63]

Not convinced by systemic starvation? Perhaps perpetual militarization is a more compelling cause. The opening of markets around the world over the past few centuries has only been possible at gunpoint. From the eradication of Indigenous populations on every continent through the ethnic genocides culminating in World War II, the growth of wealth has required the removal (by murder or incarceration) of groups that resist or are perceived to be impeding growth. Upon the conclusion of the world wars and the retreat of occupational colonialism, those regions that remained outside the dominant growth economy were pulled into it through the installation and support of capitalist-friendly regimes from the 1950s onward. Is this acceptable? Is it an endorsement of the viability, naturalness, or suitability of a form of social organization that it has only attained

dominance through mass murder?

Not convinced that perpetual accelerating economic growth is bad for people and the planet? Maybe God is more convincing. “Economic development [is] antithetical to the word of God.”[64] Regarding the monotheistic Abrahamic faiths, “All three religions unanimously prohibit . . . (interest) and declare it sinful, producing disharmony and inequality. As an alternative, they introduce the concept of brotherhood, sharing and cooperation to promote equality among communities.”[65] Traditionally no Abrahamic faith permits charging interest, and interest is the mechanism that mandates economic growth.

Aside from this theological injunction, there are secular moral standards that seem in conflict with the perpetual accumulation of wealth. Most societies rely upon a level of interpersonal empathy to sustain themselves. As such, widespread systemic impoverishment should register some level of moral objection. “In every society prior to capitalism, human economic relationships were normally bounded by rules of reciprocity and redistribution, in what might be described as a form of ‘moral economy.’”[66] While variations on forms of social organization are unimaginably vast, “The obstacles to a life with dignity are very different, but they all have something in common: to wit, the infinite accumulation of unequal differences on the unjust behalf of very few.”[67]

• • •

Given all this, are there any indispensable benefits to economic growth? The foremost reward of the past two hundred years of economic growth is usually captured under the banner of “improved standard of living.” This includes better access to health care, education, arts, and greater freedom of movement.

For those who have attained a middle-class quality of life (less than half the planet), there are indeed more opportunities to digest world-class arts, culture, and cuisine, to access the extensive catalog of Eurocolonial knowledge, and to access medicines that can prevent death. Statistically, the life expectancy of those above a

certain income threshold has doubled in the past century. Ethnographic studies of hunter-gatherer populations without access to twenty-first century medicine, however, suggest that those with middle-class lifestyles are not definitively healthier than those without modern medicine.[68] The development of medical science over the past centuries has focused on preventing death, not improving health. With all the purported technological advances of the past two hundred years, it is difficult to discern qualitative objective improvements. True, people, materials, and ideas move much faster, but this isn't universally beloved.[69] iPhones in exchange for ecocide? Hardly seems worth it.

Some suggest the growth of the Eurowest has eradicated the threat of famine in these regions. However, the reason the US and Europe haven't experienced significant famine in the past two centuries is the direct result of their domination and colonization of the non-Eurosphere. The twenty million Indians that died of famine in the late-nineteenth century were actively exporting food while starving to death. This famine would not have occurred if not for British colonial policy. Capitalism didn't solve or even reduce famine. It just created greater inequality, such that the wealthy nations no longer endure food shortages. The famines that hit Europe from the sixteenth to eighteenth century were outsourced to colonized regions. Today's starvation crises that grip sub-Saharan Africa did not occur before colonial capitalism's economic growth.

Sullivan and Hickel clinically dismantle the assumption propagated by writers like Steven Pinker that capitalist modernism has launched a great escape from poverty over the last two centuries, showing that wherever capitalism is introduced it leads to deteriorating conditions. "The rise of capitalism, rather than delivering improvements in human welfare, was associated with plummeting wages, a reduction in human stature, and a marked upturn in the incidence of famine. Progress did not begin until the 1880s in the European core."[70]

This incrimination of economic growth should not be construed as an argument for a regression to forms of social organization that existed prior to the steam engine. Going backward is both impossible

and dangerous. Retrogression easily feeds into nationalist exclusionary narratives of isolationist tribalism. We can't and shouldn't pretend we didn't invent spaceships. There should never be enforced (or voluntary) ignorance. We need new ways of thinking.

Degrowth

This is not the first book to address the sadistic logic of perpetual economic growth. The emerging field of degrowth has gained numerous adherents over the past couple of decades but has largely been met with skepticism in mainstream circles. Giorgos Kallis identifies key degrowth observations: "Civilizations before the advent of capitalism experienced very slow rates of economic growth. What was it that capitalism did differently? The major innovation was that surplus work from humans and fossil fuels was concentrated in the hands of a class of people—'capitalists' . . . who did not just store this surplus, or ceremoniously waste it for prestige, as elites and Royal courts did before, but put it back into production."[71]

Degrowthers make the resonant point that, one way or another, the economy is going to stop growing. We will either hit a brick wall of resource depletion in which inertia compels us to continue attempting to grow wealth with nothing left to commodify (this is the hellscape commonly depicted in dystopian sci-fi like *Mad Max: Fury Road*), or we can alter our infrastructure as soon as possible so that we do not require perpetual growth to sustain reproducible levels of subsistence.[72] As John Stuart Mill wrote, "the increase of wealth is not boundless . . . at the end of . . . the progressive state lies the stationary state . . . all progress in wealth is but a postponement of this."[73] Degrowthers argue that when economic growth inevitably slows (which some argue it already has), the pain will be more severe if we continue to operate as though perpetual accelerating growth were still possible. As new wealth becomes more difficult to generate, exploitation will grow more vicious.

Degrowing or stopping economic growth will be painful if interest

is not first considered. As discussed further in chapter 3, “the creation of money out of debt [interest] creates an imperative of perpetual growth.”[74] This is the mechanics of our extortion. The world must “perpetually expand its economy in order to facilitate the perpetual creation of money out of interest-bearing debt.”[75] Interest makes growth mandatory. Any degrowth regime must first consider reforming interest.

Degrowth argues that rather than attempt to continue trying to operate a growth economy when there are no more resources left, it would be better to strive toward a (relatively) painless transition to the end of growth. To denote the inevitability of degrowth (one way or the other), phrases are deployed like “controlled degrowth” or “sustainable degrowth” or “socially sustainable reduction of society’s throughput.”[76] *Sustainable degrowth* here serves as a subtle jab at the oxymoronic phrase “sustainable development” and “postulates that throughput cannot be reduced with growing GDP.”[77]

At this point, degrowth is more a recognition than a formal strategy. It is a paradigm under which many strategies have been collected and extolled. Degrowthers advocate basic and maximum income, community currencies, co-operatives, digital commons, ecovillages, job guarantees, sharing economies, timebanks, Transition Towns, urban gardening, and work sharing.[78] Concrete proposals include shortening the work week to twenty-one hours, higher rates of taxation on the wealthy, and guaranteeing green jobs.[79] To date there are over one thousand registered “transition towns” around the world, which are working toward building zero-to-low impact cities (non-growing cities).[80]

According to all the evidence and research available, the strategy of continuing economic growth without environmental degradation is impossible. “The prophesied decoupling of economic growth from throughput (material or energy use or CO_2 emissions) is not happening. And this may have to do with the fact that efficiency improvements tend to rebound to increased consumption.”[81] Degrowth also critiques ecomodernist solutions to unsustainable growth. “Rather than opposing the reckless growth imperative that

animates contemporary capitalism, ecomodernists believe that unfettered capitalism will save the planet."[82] Ecomodernist arguments are consistent with the central myth of capitalism: that unending growth is not only possible but also good—two highly dubious beliefs.

A common theme in environmental justice movements is that climate change affects marginalized communities disproportionately but also that climate change is *caused by* the exploitation of disempowered communities, through reliance on under-compensated labor. The "uneven distribution of wealth and power is, in itself, a fundamental cause of planetary environmental crisis."[83] Maintaining stark economic divides 1) prevents impoverished communities from accessing the political power necessary to combat targeted environmental destruction; 2) inhibits communities from pursuing environmentally friendly subsistence practices (cheap foods are often the least healthy for humans and environments); and 3) sustains a surplus of undervalued labor necessary for environmentally exploitative work. The 2015 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals seek to reduce inequality while maintaining sustainable economic growth, but the best way to reduce inequality would be to stop economic growth, because (under current conditions) it grows unequally.

While the degrowth movement has increased its visibility and reach over the past two decades, holds annual conferences, and has subfields like feminist degrowth, the movement's social impact has remained minimal; "many initiatives put into practice so far appear relatively impotent."[84] The resistance to degrowth speaks to the deep naturalization of the notion that economies are supposed to grow. Every institutional form of knowledge production is geared toward maximizing economic growth. Inverting this is not easy.

While there have been occasional popular concerns about the capitalized world's rate of growth, these almost always focus on population numbers (as opposed to wealth numbers). The Club of Rome's 1972 report *The Limits to Growth* and Paul and Anne Ehrlich's 1968 *The Population Bomb* both gained attention for suggesting population growth might soon cause famine and

widespread distress. The degrowth movement, while certainly not homogeneous in its ideology, astutely recognizes that population is secondary (or tertiary) to far greater problems in the production--consumption-disposal cycle. Overpopulation doesn't *cause* famines. Inequitable methods of production, distribution, and consumption cause famine.

The focus on and fear of overpopulation is indicative of the naturalization of economic growth. Yes, it will be extremely problematic if the planet is forced to host ten billion capitalized people (it is incapable of adequately hosting seven billion). The Club of Rome assumed that economic growth was a baseline pursuit of society, thus understandably concluded that current rates of growth were ultimately unsustainable. That is, it was easier for them to imagine cataclysmic starvation than the end of economic growth.

There is no set number of people that can live on the planet. There aren't too many people; there is too much production. Population growth, though, continues to be popularly identified as more problematic than economic growth. The tacit (or explicit) implication of those who are afraid of population growth and not economic growth is that they would rather eliminate people from the planet than eliminate wealth from the planet. The genocidal endpoint of this should be clear.

Today there is an odd far-right environmentalism emerging that recognizes the unsustainability of our current trajectory. Sadly, the aim of these actors is to strictly militarize national borders, hoard resources, and in the worst-case scenarios reduce the competition for resources—killing minority groups. This was the stated motivation of the 2019 mass-shooting in El Paso (twenty-three were murdered). The El Paso shooter (a twenty-one-year-old) invoked such concerns in his murder note: "Corporations are heading the destruction of our environment by shamelessly overharvesting resources. . . . If we can get rid of enough people, then our way of life can be more sustainable."

This closely aligns with Malthus's thinking: violence is inseparable from perpetual economic growth. Sometimes it is more blatant, as with shootings, but it's always there. "The logic here assumes the

shameless behavior is inevitable. . . . The perpetrator admits that the colonial ‘way of life’ is shameless, yet violently defends it. This act was performed to help secure a future in which the shameless overharvesting of resources remains feasible.”[85]

Why is population growth interpreted by many as problematic while economic growth is interpreted as a blessing? When we hear about economic growth, we should get nervous. When we hear about economic growth, we should realize that, somewhere, someone or millions of people were exploited (often violently) to attain that growth. We should realize that this economic growth was most likely attained by releasing tons of CO_2 into the atmosphere.

One reason the degrowth movement has failed to make deeper inroads may be the conflation of making money with virtuous hard work. While it may surprise those who equate socialism with handouts to loafers, “the abolition of unearned income . . . is the immediate economic aim of every socialistic movement.”[86] Interest collected by landholders and lenders is the most abundant form of unearned income today. “Why does the capitalist, without personally exerting himself, obtain this endless flow of wealth?”[87] Today’s capitalized economy has been spun as promoting bootstrapping individual hard work, but at its core it is about rich people exploiting others. Ending interest ends handouts to the wealthiest 10 percent.[88]

To complement existing degrowth literature, this book brings the history and mechanics of interest under closer scrutiny. For example, the vast literature on Islamic banking (discussed within) should mingle more with the degrowth movement. Degrowthers have amply shown the drawbacks of the past two centuries of exponential economic growth, pointed to some causes, and offered some solutions. However, less attention has been paid to how growth became normalized. This book fills that void. To address today’s crises, “it is not enough to point out all the different reasons why perpetual economic growth is impossible and unsustainable. We need to understand how the idea of growth is deeply ingrained in ideology as well as the organization of our society.”[89]

Add It Up

Every day, every minute, wealth is growing. Maybe not your wealth or the wealth of your nation, but with every passing second the aggregate of global wealth, whether money, cattle, crops, stocks, miscellaneous commodities, or intellectual properties, grows. Even during the 2008 financial crises, global wealth didn't stop growing. When we hear about downturns in the economy, wealth is usually still growing, just not fast enough for anxious investors. This is not a decision anyone makes or doesn't make; the growth of wealth has been set in motion over the past few centuries. This social fact is so deeply buried in the fabric of contemporary existence that it rarely registers as good or bad.

The most egregious violence of the past centuries cannot be separated from the pursuit of economic growth. Whether considering the eradication of Native Americans, the Atlantic slave trade, or Indigenous Guatemalan genocide, the perpetual growth of wealth the planet has endured these past centuries has been accompanied by perpetual massacre. At virtually no moment since the industrial-colonial explosion of wealth has racialized mass murder not been ongoing.[90] You can say there has always been conflict and antagonism, but you cannot say there has always been racialized mass murder. Traditionally when murder, exploitation, or theft become excessive, societies alter their organization to address such problems before they become normalized.[91]

Increasingly, many irreconcilable injustices and existential threats related to perpetual economic growth are being voiced. However, little to nothing has been done to arrest the exploitative backdrop that fuels normalized economic growth, least of all the cognitive work of imagining a world without such injustices. While the everyday growth of wealth remains a boring social fact, the violence of this boredom is becoming increasingly egregious. This book seeks to foreground the pattern of violence built into the current regime of growth. "The failure to change the world may not be unrelated to the failure to understand it."[92]

Losing Interest aims to make economic growth controversial, questioning its assumed neutrality (or sometimes virtue). More boldly, I present historical and anthropological episodes that suggest economic growth is a tyranny manifesting unending cataclysms upon the planet's inhabitants. Exploitative growth must end, not to preserve any claims on a "way of life" but rather to end the current "way of death."[93]

Some may accuse this language of being provocative. Hopefully! The world needs to be provoked. Economic growth is without remorse or empathy; it is unfeeling, sadistic, abusive, egocentric, duplicitous. The issue is not that moral norms have changed (they are always negotiable) but rather that morality is no longer considered a valid basis for determining policy decisions or social organization.

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Interest is the primary mechanism by which the perpetual growth of wealth has been normalized. It is this common financial tool, the charging of a fee for the lending of wealth, that is most directly implicated in cultivating the notion that growing wealth forever is necessary. Today the idea of economic activity without interest is nearly unthinkable. The goal of this book, then, is to *think* about interest, to reveal that it is not banal, not neutral.

There's a reason no other human groups have perpetually accelerated the growth of their wealth in the prior 300,000 years (at least not for more than a couple of centuries). It's not because they weren't cunning enough, it's because it's a bad idea—it doesn't work. Most groups go to great lengths to prevent the accelerating growth of wealth. A variety of checks and restrictions on economic growth are visible ethnographically. Wealth destruction practices in Indigenous North America (potlatches and competitive feasting), redistributive marriage and inheritance practices, or reciprocity economies in the South Pacific—all are proactive restrictions on long-term asymmetrical economic growth. In medieval Europe there were "levelling mechanisms, such as assemblies, potlatch, funerals

and so on, [to] counteract the accumulation of wealth by a central person."[94]

Keynes wrote in 1930 (borrowing from Shakespeare), "For at least another hundred years we must pretend . . . that fair is foul and foul is fair; for foul is useful and fair is not. Avarice and usury . . . must be our gods for a little longer still. For only they can lead us out of the tunnel of economic necessity into daylight." Well, it's been about a hundred years since Keynes's proclamation. Can we stop pretending that foul is fair and bring this exploitative growth to an end?

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1 Jason Hickel, Giorgos Kallis, Tim Jackson, Daniel W. O'Neill, Juliet B. Schor, Julia K. Steinberger, Peter A. Victor, and Diana Ürge-Vorsatz, "Degrowth Can Work—Here's How Science Can Help," *Nature* 612 (2022): 402.

2 "If . . . we are to stay within ecological limits we will have to do with less high-speed transport infrastructures, space missions for tourists, new airports, or factories producing unnecessary gadgets, faster cars or better televisions." Giorgos Kallis, "In Defence of Degrowth," *Ecological Economics* 70 no. 5 (2011): 875.

3 More insightful recent archaeological interpretations use terms like "transitioned" instead of "collapsed" (see Jago Cooper and Payson Sheets, *Surviving Sudden Environmental Change: Answers from Archaeology* [Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2012]).

4 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 5.

5 For some the word "wealth" may be synonymous with "well-being" or simply "good things." Within such a vocabulary, the "growth of well-being" would be inherently welcome. For

purposes of this book, however, wealth means monetarily valued assets, including money, cars, cattle, rice, intellectual property, shoes, cigarettes, land, credit, time, and anything else valued in monetary terms.

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8 Liam Downey, *Inequality, Democracy, and the Environment* (New York: NYU Press, 2015).

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14 David Graeber, "Consumption," *Current Anthropology* 52, no. 4 (2011): 489–511.

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16 Gurminder Bhambra, "Colonial Global Economy: Towards a Theoretical Reorientation of Political Economy," *Review of International Political Economy* 28, no. 2 (2020): 307–22.

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18 John E. Martin, *Feudalism to Capitalism: Peasant and Landlord in English Agrarian Development* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 50.

19 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1987), 436.

20 Bill Weinberg, "Beyond Extraction: An Interview with Rafael Quispe," *North American Congress on Latin America* 21 (2010). See also Kallis, "Degrowth," 875: "experienced communist regimes also sought continuous—state rather than private—accumulation and growth."

21 Not incidentally, Cuba (a nation that doesn't prioritize the growth of wealth) is the only nation with both a high UN

Development Index and a low ecological footprint.
22 Kallis, “Degrowth,” 875.
23 Rosa Luxemburg, *The Accumulation of Capital* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), 369.
24 Luxemburg, *Accumulation*, 370. Note also that in May 2022, the state of Florida enshrined November 7 as Victims of Communism Day and made it compulsory for public schools to teach about the “victims of communism.” One wonders when “Victims of Capitalism Day” will be honored.
25 Murat Ustaoglu and Ahmet İncekara, *A History of Interest and Debt: Ancient Civilizations* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 1.
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Albert Einstein, “Why Socialism?” *Monthly Review* (1949).
27 Vinay Gidwani, *Capital, Interrupted: Agrarian Development and the Politics of Work in India* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 227.
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Ashley Dawson, “Biocapitalism and De-Extinction,” in *After Extinction*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 184.
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31 David Harvey, *The Urban Experience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Cindi Katz, “Whose Nature, Whose Culture? Private Productions of Space and the Preservation of Nature,” in *Remaking Reality: Nature at the Millennium*, eds. Bruce Braun and Noel Castree (London:

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33 Luxemburg, *Accumulation*, 222, 220.

34 Luxemburg, *Accumulation*, 345–46.

35 While potentially disorienting, whenever using the terms “liberal” or “liberalism” in this book, I am referring to the classical notion that signals a lack of government intervention in economic affairs—deregulation. I am not referring to policy positions loosely attributed to the modern Democrat party in the US, including positions on reproductive freedom, racial justice, or environmental regulation.

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(New York: Basic Books, 1976), 237–38.
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43 Stefan Eich, "The Theodicy of Growth: John Rawls, Political Economy, and Reasonable Faith," *Modern Intellectual History* 18, no. 4 (2021): 999.
44 Mises, *Epistemological Problems*, 42.
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47 Geisst, *Beggar Thy Neighbor*, 34.
48 Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion*, 329.
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John Stuart Mill, *Essays on Some Unsettled Questions of Political Economy* (London: Longmans, Green, 2004), 248.
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Chapter Two: A Radical Break (Interest)

“Usury is receiving more than one has given.”

—SAINT AMBROSE, C. 374 CE

“There is usury wherever one demands more than one gives.”

—CHARLEMAGNE CAPITULARY, 806 CE

“Usury is everything that is asked in exchange for a loan, beyond the value of the loan itself.”

—POPE URBAN III, 1187 CE

“For whoso lends, expecting to receive better or more, is an open and condemned usurer.”

—MARTIN LUTHER, 1540

Today few refute that usury is ethically dubious. The act is generally defined by its immorality and unfairness. Usury is popularly considered unfair or excessive interest. The quotes above (and there are many more like them) illustrate that, at several points over the past millennia, usury was synonymous with interest, not *excessive* interest. Charging interest *at all* was unethical and immoral. The ignominy of usury applied to any interest-taking in much of Europe up to the nineteenth century.[1] This chapter offers a history of interest to reveal how sociopolitical perceptions of the practice have vacillated over the years and how interest has today become naturalized. Did charging interest somehow become ethical? Or have ethics themselves become inconsequential in today’s dominant form of socioeconomic organization?

First, a few popular definitions of interest: interest is charging someone a fee to borrow wealth not currently in use; interest is a tactic to motivate the swift return of one's lent wealth; interest is a penalty for not being wealthy; interest is rent paid on capital; interest is a fee paid for transferring (projected) future wealth into the present; interest is how new money is born.

Dwelling on these multiple framings of interest loosens the mind a bit for the following historical venture. Interest is not and never was a homogeneous concept and practice. Rather than authoring a definitive account of interest's history (an effort attempted several times), it is perhaps more compelling to argue that no such definitive history is possible.[2] Celebrated historian Jacques Le Goff admits that usury is "a phenomenon about which economic historians know all too little."[3] Instead, interest is characterized by wide variation in how it is conducted and perceived cross-culturally and intra-culturally. Over the preceding millennia it has been sanctified as a miracle and condemned as "a tireless and endless sin, a chastisement without end, an unflinching henchman of Satan."[4]

If nothing else, this chapter illustrates that, for most of its history, interest has been controversial. Today, however, while we may hear grumblings about the Fed's interest rate, rarely is the idea of interest itself challenged. Its existence is not politically contentious. Many economic histories of the past two centuries speak of overcoming interest bans as "inevitable" or "fortunate."[5] Le Goff fringes this sentiment too, "The usurer is the precursor of capitalism, an economic system that, despite its injustices and failings, is part of the West's trajectory of progress."[6]

Interest prohibitions have been called a "nuisance" impeding modern "prosperity."[7] Böhm-Bawerk speaks of prohibitions on interest as superstitious, suggesting interest bans were akin to belief in a geocentric solar system. Claiming that it's superstitious to believe interest is unethical, is to claim that ethics themselves are superstitious—a position implicitly taken by many secular modernist commentators from the eighteenth century to today.

Despite the common sentiment that unleashing interest was an inevitable step on the march of progress, there remains surprisingly

widespread disagreement about contemporaneous perceptions of interest restrictions and the causes for the erosion of these restrictions. Some sources suggest interest bans were not too serious and rarely enforced.[8] Others point out that charging interest was punishable by excommunication, imprisonment, fines, and damnation. Both these perspectives (and everything in between) can be found in the historical (and archaeological) record. Today, however, views on interest appear sedentary and homogeneous. With unsettling confidence Geisst writes, "*No one* today will agree with the Scholastics that interest is inherently unjust and should be banned."[9]

Studying histories of interest (its practice and prohibition) is a multi-millennia endeavor. One encounters historical interpretations of historical interpretations on cross-cutting scales. One could study Hellenic usury legislation, medieval interpretations of Hellenic usury legislation, or nineteenth-century interpretations of fourteenth-century interpretations of Hellenic usury legislation. The late medieval scholastics were themselves attempting to reconstruct the sentiments from a millennium earlier. In turn, it is not difficult to imagine that lawmakers in Hellenic or Judaic spheres in, say, 300 BCE were considering the traditions of Mesopotamian predecessors a millennium earlier still. Thus, if one began by looking at late medieval sentiments on the permissibility of interest, they'd be coming to the party rather late. So this extended history is offered to better appreciate how long and varied have been conversations of interest.

Empiric Evidence

"The laws of Eshnunna begin a four-thousand-year history of legislation on interest-taking."[10] For several millennia, large-scale hierarchical societies have struggled to variously suppress and unleash interest. Interest appears to be a technology that, once invented, cannot be un-invented. It is responsible for the rise of

monumental societies and their collapse. It is the cause of massive wealth accumulation and extreme poverty. Interest creates and exaggerates division and difference. If a community of relative equals begins lending and exchanging at interest, over time minor initial distinctions will exacerbate until a community of multiple tiers of economic hierarchy emerges. This story has played out hundreds of times over thousands of years.

Much archaeological evidence suggests the earliest writing pertains to accounting and bookkeeping.[11] Denise Schmandt-Besserat claims literacy itself evolved from numerically tracking who owed what to whom via clay tokens as early as seven thousand years ago.[12] There is textual documentation pertaining to lending practices and regulations in the Ur-Nammu Code (~2050 BCE), the Code of Eshnunna (~1925 BCE), the Code of Lipit-Ishtar (~1860 BCE), the Code of Hammurabi (~1700 BCE), the Hittite Code (~1450 BCE), the Assyrian Code (~1350), and the Covenant Code (~1000 BCE), to name a few.

The financial content of these law codes suggests a significant correlation between practicing interest-based lending and the emergence of large-scale city-states. From 3000 BCE to 2000 BCE, city-states and empires emerged in Mesopotamia. Large-scale investments were necessary to facilitate imperial infrastructure (e.g., the construction of canals and temples). Such investments, one way or another, require a temporal shifting of wealth—financing. “Financial technology is a time machine . . . [it] has stretched the ability of humans to imagine and calculate the future.”[13]

The law codes that appear in the archaeological record around 2000 BCE show regulating interest rates to be a significant concern of urban legislators. If the practice was being explicitly regulated circa 2000 BCE, one presumes it was prevalent prior to the legislation. The issue of interest seems to permeate the social fabric of these early hierarchical societies. The impression one gets from early texts, which may, of course, be misrepresentative, is that farmers of Near East empires must have been engaged in regular seasonal calculations of debts and credits. Twenty of Hammurabi’s 282 codes deal with interest.

The legal rates and punishments for insolvency on debt and usury were steadily amended throughout the Bronze Age and into the Egyptian and Hellenic spheres. Many codes stipulate interest ceilings for lenders, which generally translate to rates of about 20 percent to 50 percent. If the legal ceilings are set at such high rates, it could be assumed that unregulated interest rates were even higher. Maloney cautions that these high rates were not “as outrageous as they sound,” considering the economy was based on agricultural output. A good harvest could produce thirty-five times the seed sown. Thus a 33 percent interest rate on the seed lent would come to about 1 percent of the total yield.[14]

Many laws concern punishments for insolvent debtors and excessive usurers. Hammurabi’s code permits debtors to defer repayment in case of crop failures due to extreme or unexpected weather. In what could be interpreted as a protection of borrowers, the laws seem increasingly concerned with closing loopholes that creditors had exploited to squeeze debtors, such as charging interest on interest and setting repayment schedules at early dates. These regulations suggest an awareness that unregulated interest is problematic.

While insolvency could land you a couple years of servitude, usually one did not lend to those they thought incapable of repayment.[15] *Responsible* financing demands that lenders *want* to be paid back and to imagine that they will.[16] Excessive indebtedness was less common in Babylonia than today because it simply wasn’t profitable. Today this situation is somewhat inverted—driving people deeper and deeper into debt is quite lucrative.

In Hellenic polities, conversations regarding credit, debt, and money were highly visible. Hellenic interest rates held generally around 24 percent. Along with records of prevailing rates, Aristotle famously condemned interest, insisting that money is sterile; money cannot beget itself, reproduce itself. Some economic historians have accused Aristotle of naivety, arguing that, over the past five hundred years, it has become clear that money can reproduce itself.[17] Aristotle was aware, however, that money could beget itself but rather was highlighting the injustice and abuse of interest. “Greeks

seem to have been opposed to commerce because it was not conducive to 'moral' behavior: it promoted inequality of wealth."[18]

Despite the admonitions of Plato and Aristotle, interest remained widespread in the classical Greek and Roman spheres. In a revealing passage of history-telling, Gelpi and Julien-Labruyère suggest that Greek philosophers "believe[d] that the abolition of interest-based credit would bring about a return of the golden age. This was the first time in history when credit became the scapegoat for the confusion brought about by changes in society."[19] Here the authors implicitly reject interest as a *cause* of social disorientation, labeling it as a scapegoat for some other unidentified cause.

On Roman finance, Saint Jerome (writing ca. 400 CE) contended "Usury appears to be an endemic evil which worsened daily."[20] It has been suggested that Julius Caesar's ambition to cap interest rates earned him the enmity of peers, leading to his demise.[21] The squeezing of the peasantry by the aristocracy through interest was the primary driver in the disintegration of Roman power (both Western and Eastern).[22] "Interest bearing debt contributed to the dissolution of the Roman Empire."[23]

Regulations on interest were also codified in Vedic texts from India. Early Vedic laws (ca. 2000–1200 BCE) define usury (*kusidin*) as any lending at interest (no matter the rate). In the Sutra and Jataka texts (ca. 700–100 BCE) the practice is explicitly condemned, forbidding "the higher castes . . . from being usurers or lenders at interest."[24] India's injunction against interest appears to fade over time (perhaps correlating with increased exposure to Western economics).

Insidiously, if neighboring polities are pursuing interest, it becomes difficult to prohibit or restrict the practice in one's own region. To prohibit interest while exchange partners practice it has the long-term effect of diminishing the value of your wealth. Polities engaged in interest-taking must grow, potentially impeding the resource base of surrounding communities. Such incursions often result in increasingly competitive exploitation of environments—a process quite visible today. Whether for copper under the Greenlandic ice sheet, Bolivia's lithium, or Namibia's uranium, the profit-driven thirst

for commodifiable resources is insatiable.

Abrahamic Prohibition

“In general interest was allowed everywhere in the ancient Near East except in Israel.”[25] Within a sea of interest-based economies, Semitic monotheists in the Levant made explicit injunctions against lending at interest, regardless of the rate. Textual Abrahamic prohibitions on interest date to at least 500 BCE, but their lineage could go back to ~1200 BCE.[26] When Maloney writes above that interest was practiced everywhere in the ancient Near East, by “everywhere” he surely means “settled agrarian communities.” This characterization excludes nomads, pastoralists, or hunters and gatherers, which James Scott reminds us made up most of the population at the time.[27]

A few narratives have been offered for why Jewish injunctions against interest developed and remained relatively resolute up to the Early Modern period. Proactively, having seen the inequality and injustice that comes with the imperial city-states, including the poverty, aggression, and conflict, Hebrews took the initiative to ban economic relations that engendered such social animus. More passively, having emerged from nomadic small-scale roots in the Late Bronze Age, interest-based lending was never an aspect of Hebrew social formation. Either way, Hebrew culture was unique in codifying its ban on interest.

Another narrative is that interest bans were not actually followed that closely in early Hebrew communities. As the kingdoms of Israel and Judah grew, usury was presumably practiced from time to time, otherwise why sacralize its prohibition? To explicitly restrict a social behavior (whether it is charging interest or consuming pork) suggests that it is a behavior that, without the restriction, people may be compelled to indulge in.

The famous verses in Deuteronomy, Leviticus, and Exodus that condemn interest suggest it is detrimental to community well-being.[28]

Notoriously, depending on the translation, charging interest is prohibited to brothers, neighbors, countrymen, “my people,” or Israelites. The tragically exploitative misinterpretation (or intentional misreading) of these lines, most notably by late medieval Christian rulers, has been that Judaism encourages charging interest to non-Jews. This interpretation is explicitly contradicted in Leviticus: “should a countryman of yours become poor . . . then you are to sustain him like a foreigner or a sojourner. . . . Take no interest from him or profit” (Leviticus 25:35–36). This seems to suggest it is just as illicit to take interest from foreigners as neighbors.

It is tragic that antisemitic tropes center on Jews as moneylenders when ancient Hebrew society was quite unique in its identification and condemnation of exploitative money lending. Oelsner has debunked the idea that Jews had been distinguished as moneylenders prior to the late medieval period and that their religion prescribed taking interest from strangers.[29] “Jews were not principal moneylenders in Europe until the thirteenth century.”[30] This timing corresponds well with the increasing crackdown on lending at interest in Christendom.

While theologians and translators should continue debating the nuance of contemporaneous meanings of “neighbor” or “my people” upon which modern stereotypes rely, it is clear from Judaic, Christian, and Islamic writing that charging interest is a hostile act, an act that one would commit against their enemies. Saint Ambrose (~374 CE) writes, “Wherever therefore you have a right to wage war, you have a right to take usury.”[31] In their history of usury, Meislin and Cohen add that “interest is an expression of animosity[,] and loans without interest express love.”[32] Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all condemn interest-taking as disharmonious.[33] Despite the strained interpretations over the past two thousand years justifying interest in Judaism and Christianity, it is unequivocal that interest is harmful. Theologians only “considered usury lawful if it would harm the adversary.”[34]

Idiosyncrasies of translation have been critical in the semantic justifications for interest over the millennia: “The Revised Standard Version of the Bible translates ‘usury’ as referring to ‘excessive’

interest, that is, to usury over and above the legal rate approved by civil authorities. This anachronism distorts the text's meaning. *Neither Hebrew, Greek, nor Latin had separate words to distinguish between interest and usury*."[35]

Interest-based lending is, under any reading, an act of ill-will, disrespect, or disregard toward the borrower. The mechanics by which interest deteriorates social relations, leads to multigenerational instability, and causes environmental spoliation are complex. One needs a longitudinal perspective to grasp why exactly God might disfavor interest. This is why religions are so unsatisfying to secular humanists—they boil down incredibly complex moral and ethical issues into simple edicts that demand adherence. Rather than elucidate the mechanics of debt, financing, and economic growth in holy scripture, it may be more powerful for God to simply forbid interest.

Whether it is ancient Assyrian restrictions or total bans in Judaism, it is never explicitly spelled out that interest laws are in place to constrain the antagonism that comes with runaway inequality. From medieval scholastics to today's Islamic bankers, this lack of clarity has served to complicate subsequent efforts to regulate usurious acts. Beginning in the late Middle Ages, scholars increasingly began to depict interest simply as evil, as opposed to just bureaucratically forbidden. "Usury was essentially diabolic."[36] As the temptation to charge interest grew in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Europe, so did the severity of its condemnation.

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Much discussion on the ethics of interest over the past two millennia has centered on the distinction between loans for investment and loans for consumption (subsistence). For the poor (those taking out loans for consumption), interest was never permitted, whether for "neighbors" or "foreigners." Across the board, in nearly every tradition, lending at interest for subsistence loans was considered immoral until the twentieth century.

In non-capitalized societies, loans are usually for small immediate

causes due to current shortfalls or hardships. Among the capitalized, loans are sought for investments intended to generate ever greater wealth over decade-long timescales. That is, lending was transformed from help for the distressed into a mechanism for growing the wealth of the rich. “In the ancient world there was very little lending for production . . . [lending] was almost exclusively for consumption.”[37]

Of the three major Abrahamic faiths, Islam has carried the religious prohibition on interest into the present with the greatest conviction, but capitalism is incompatible with adherence to any Abrahamic faith. The pursuit of asymmetrical economic growth is the antithesis of values espoused in Abrahamic holy texts.[38] In the 1926 landmark work *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, economic historian Richard Tawney writes, “Compromise is . . . impossible between the Church of Christ and the idolatry of wealth, which is the practical religion of capitalist societies.”[39]

The practice of capitalism, whether in fifteenth-century Florence or twentieth-century Riyadh, is not undertaken because the Abrahamic faiths subtly condone interest-taking but instead because the social pressures to adhere to the principles of the faith were not strong enough to withstand drives for material wealth. That is, in “properly” functioning Abrahamic societies (or nearly any other non-capitalized society ethnographically observed), if an individual were to attain ostentatious wealth by disregarding established social mores, they would have been banished, shamed, or even executed. Early wealth aggregators in Christian Europe, including powerful nobles, did endure censure. The censure became ineffective, though, because it was directed by a corruptible central authority—the Church—as opposed to locally organized direct actions.

Abrahamic monotheism had built-in constraints on the perpetual accelerating growth of wealth. In the second millennium of the Common Era, a systematic dismantling of these constraints began, which the Christian Church was either unable or unwilling to fend off. The Church was the primary keeper of Europe’s social mechanisms for preventing exponential economic growth, but its ability to enforce these mechanisms endured great shocks after the Black Death,

Reformation, and Enlightenment. Among the many effects of losing one-third of the population in the Black Death was a loosening of the Church's power. With the loss of population, the Church lost significant revenue streams, which inspired the increased selling of indulgences (direct tickets to heaven for the morally suspect), which significantly fueled the Reformation and the division of Christianity in Europe.[40]

Dark Stability

"The tenth century, in which European economy and culture reach their nadir, shows no development."[41] Equating the low point of European culture with the low point of the economy, and relating this to a lack of "development" exemplifies common perceptions of what are considered the Dark Ages. These infamously ill-lit years, a period generally understood to extend from the fall of the Western Roman Empire to the Renaissance, has been characterized as a nearly thousand-year stretch of cultural regression. Textbook glossings of the period suggest that progress in technology, philosophy, science, art, and commerce epitomized by Roman and Hellenic society was buried and forgotten for a thousand years. The culture of these early dynasties was preserved among Byzantian and Arab scholars and subsequently "rediscovered" during the Crusades. Ideas and texts brought back to continental Europe by Crusaders then planted the seeds of the Renaissance, which reignited Western civilization and culture, leading inexorably to skyscrapers and iPhones.

Such easy narratives have been dismantled by many, but the equation of cultural regression to a lack of economic growth is worth unpacking further.[42] The Middle Ages, regardless of what the popular imagination first conjures, were a period of *relative* social stability in which the over-exploitation of resources was not practiced, and relatively fewer large-scale conflicts occurred. From the perspective of those who have naturalized the perpetual growth of wealth, any polities that do not pursue exponential asymmetrical accumulation

are seen as backward, dark, or retrogressive. Stability is directly equated with cultural regression. Not growing is regressing—the tagline of capital.

Today's fear of stasis is diametrically opposed to prevailing attitudes before the Black Death. "The Middle Ages totally avoided the celebration of anything new. On the contrary, within the Church, which encompassed all intellectual life, the word *novitas*, newness, filled those who heard it with fear and hostility. . . . Anything new was apocalyptic."[43] The Dark Ages are associated with a period in which there was little to no lending at interest (or disbursements of interest). Is it simply a lack of interest-based lending and saving (that is, the lack of compulsory economic growth) that make the Dark Ages dark? The stability of an interest-free world is *darkness*? In an *interest*-ing world, growing wealth is mandated. Restraining economic growth poses a greater social challenge. Post-medieval EuroChristendom didn't *succeed* in exponentially growing its economy; it *failed* to contain its growth.

Geisst refers to the inability to maximally grow wealth in the Middle Ages as "misery."[44] For such thinkers, "darkness" is basically synonymous with a lack of opulence; an opulence that is only attained through inequality and exploitation. Just as archaeologists refer to the years following the Bronze Age Collapse in the Mediterranean (ca. ~1200 BCE) as a Dark Age because the region's empires stopped "making noise," Europe's Dark Age is most notably defined by smaller, dispersed forms of power, as opposed to aggregated, centralized power.[45]

Despite pop culture depictions, the Dark Ages should not be thought of as a period of intellectual decline or superstitious stupidity. Intricate systems for effective multigenerational resource management developed in the various commoning practices during these Dark Ages. From millennium-long quota systems in Iceland to decades-long agricultural cycles of clearing, cropping, and fallowing across Europe, many resource management systems deployed in Dark Age Europe were more complex than the industrial mono-culture farming that dominates today's global calorie production.[46] If anything, practical agricultural and less superstitious knowledge

flourished in the Middle Ages. It is with early modernity that knowledge became more abstracted (see the veneration of “exchange-value”) and superstitious (see the sixteenth century Witch Trials).

Rather than describing the prevailing medieval socioeconomic regime as “dark,” it may be more apt to describe it as *common*—the Commons Age. *Feudalism* was not a word or concept used contemporaneously in the Middle Ages (it didn’t gain popularity until the 1600s) and may cloud our perceptions of the period.[47] *Commons*, *commune*, and *community* were however words in contemporary use. Most people were organized under a commons system of resource distribution on a much more immediate level than feudal domination.[48]

European polities succeeded in suppressing excessive economic growth during this Dark Age via a system of social organization that de-emphasized both monetary transactions and private property.[49] “Orthodox and Marxian economists are agreed that interest is an inseparable concomitant of private ownership.”[50] Historians have reasonably asked whether the relative lack of interest-based lending during the Middle Ages was simply a byproduct of minimal monetary circulation and investing, as opposed to a pious commitment to Abrahamic interest prohibitions.

The rise in condemnations of interest certainly parallels the rise in commercial activity. This has led some to claim that interest prohibitions weren’t really that important in early medieval life and only became relevant when merchants began acquiring wealth and power to rival the established order. That is, the Church proclaimed usury a greater sin as its power and influence waned—“the Church faced the development of a commercial economy with initial hostility.”[51] However, the initial retrenching of anti-usury sentiment and legislation in the eleventh century was targeted at the clergy itself. It wasn’t until the twelfth century that Church injunctions began targeting the laity, suggesting the Church’s anti-usury sentiment was not self-serving.

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The severity accorded to the sin of usury increased significantly toward the end of the Middle Ages. Prior to the eleventh century, interest was seen as a sin of uncharitableness, which required internal sorrow for forgiveness. Later it became a sin against justice, closer to heresy, which required material compensation, excommunication, or banishment. In the 1100s it was merely ignominious, but by the 1200s William of Auxerre claimed usury was worse than murder (because there was no excuse for usury, while murder could sometimes be justified).[52] By 1311, Pope Clement V had issued a total ban on interest.

Concerning the concurrent rise of commercialization and admonitions against interest, "increased levels of commercialization and market activity must have eroded the atavistic norm against interest."[53] Calling interest bans atavistic presupposes that an economy based on perpetual growth is inevitable and superior to one that is not. Rather than seeing these "atavistic" laws against usury as stabilizing, they are seen by many economic historians as inconvenient impediments. The much-lauded historian Fernand Braudel, author of *Civilization and Capitalism*, is guilty of a similar teleology: "[With] the gathering speed of the money economy . . . it was inevitable that one day 'vitruperable' usury would be admitted in the open light of day."[54]

Scholastic Promiscuity

Of the many medieval explanations for why God opposed interest, a prominent line of thought focused on time. Charging interest is like selling time, and time is a resource freely given by God; no human has the right to sell time. Interest was also considered a form of theft. That is, charging interest on a loan is equivalent to charging borrowers twice for the same thing—money and its use. "To accept usury for the loan of money is in itself unjust; because this is selling

what does not exist, and *must obviously give rise to inequality*, which is contrary to justice."[55] Likewise, Martin Luther considered interest a way to make the poor buy their own need.

These postulates were produced by medieval scholastics to explain interest bans from thousands of years prior. Is it possible the scholastics were overthinking it? The biblical injunctions don't say anything about stealing time. Why can't charging interest just be sinful because it leads to animosity and social schisms, as can adultery, theft, envy, and the rest of the Abrahamic transgressions. Interpretations of interest bans from scholars over the past millennia rarely state flatly that the ban developed because the perpetual growth of unequal wealth has negative social effects. Debt has been discussed in such terms but rarely debt's inextricable counterpart—excess.[56]

Most economic histories retain the Eurocentric assumption that people will unquestionably pursue a path of maximal material enrichment. "Surely anyone seeking profits will seek to maximize them."[57] Thus, nineteenth and twentieth-century histories offer their own convoluted explanations of how and why interest bans began receiving greater attention in the late medieval period. Rarely is the question asked why any society would ever *allow* the practice of interest (i.e., it is rarely asked why a group would actively let its wealth accumulate exponentially and asymmetrically)—the assumption is that everyone would choose to have their wealth grow forever.

The permissibility of perpetual wealth accumulation has been the exception historically and cross-culturally. Aside from the wealth destruction practices and gifting economies described above—which serve as restrictions on wealth accumulation—various rules of inheritance and marriage have developed to prevent drastic and unequal accumulations of wealth. From dowry systems to exogamous partnering to crossing descent (where daughters inherit from the father's family and sons from the mother's family), wealth redistribution is inalienable from family organization in many societies.[58] Early anthropologists from Boas to Malinowksi emphasize that non-Western groups care little for surplus, even

seeing it as undesirable. While some see wealth destruction ceremonies as “squandering” surplus, those who have not naturalized perpetual economic growth could interpret such acts as “cleaning out” unnecessary excess. Instead of *failing* to transform their excess into more excess, these societies *succeeded* in preventing their excess from growing.

In this light, interest restrictions should not seem so odd as to require multiple ornate explanations. More needing explanation is how these restrictions broke down. There is no historical consensus on this front, suggesting multiple causes for the demise of interest bans. Shifting attitudes derived from the scientific revolution and Enlightenment helped cultivate notions that humans knew better than God and were thus not beholden to millennia-old strategies for economic behavior, but even the pious developed arguments to justify usury.

The most compelling argument for the ethical permissibility of interest has been that money is worth more today than in the future (100 future dollars is not as valuable as 100 present dollars, so if I take your $100 today and then give you back $100 a year later, I’ve actually stolen from you). This justification for interest was voiced by sixteenth-century theologians at the School of Salamanca.[59] The arguments of these Spanish scholars were echoed by Dutch and British merchants undertaking global maritime trading.

This argument is almost the precise inverse of the prominent scholastic justification for biblical prohibitions on interest—that it is stealing time from God. The Salamanca argument espoused a universal time preference for wealth *now* as opposed to *tomorrow*. Time closer to the present is considered more valuable than time in the future because the existence of future time is less certain. “Money that is absent is not worth as much as money that is present.”[60] That is, the School of Salamanca declared interest was *acceptable* because humans could not be sure of future time, whereas scholastics declared interest *sinful* because it presumed humans could control futures.

While it is odd that theologians in sixteenth-century Salamanca justified interest with nearly the exact opposite logic used against it

three hundred years earlier, the Salamanca reasoning is also a bit circular. It is interest itself that ensures that the same amount of money becomes worth less as time moves forward. A normalization of interest-based economics was used to justify interest in this circumstance. Anas Zarqa, among others, has argued against this universalization of a time preference for the present assumed by European economists.[61] The idea that the present is more valuable than the future is by no means universal. Citing a fifth-century text that had entered canon law, Le Goff notes, “Money that has been lent neither diminishes nor grows old,” contradicting the modern notion of kinetic wealth and time preference.[62]

Some have used the equally elliptical argument that the removal of interest bans occurred due to a need for investment in infrastructure: “The decline of usury laws may be the result of an increased need for financing.”[63] But why the *need* for greater financing? This need is driven by the compulsory growth of wealth induced by the use of interest. Thus, many historians offer a stylized version of the redundant conclusion that the decline of usury laws was the result of the need for usury.

Esteemed historians like Le Goff and Braudel encourage the troubling idea that overcoming interest bans was simply inevitable—or, more precisely, that interest bans were rolled back because they were standing in the way of progress. This is an impressive display of retrojection—understanding past events through future outcomes; understanding causes by their effects. It is a stretch to characterize an event that took four thousand years to unfold (the unquestioned acceptance of interest) as inevitable. If the moral neutralization of interest was inevitable, it is odd that it only just occurred in the twentieth century, after millennia of refutation. Champions of modernity might claim that the enlightened world of today emerged precisely because the millennia-long battle to overcome superstitious interest bans was finally won, but this doesn’t mean it was inevitable.

There is no question that interest-based lending has been used to finance large-scale investments in technology and infrastructure that are framed as inherently good (railroads, etc.). However, along with those “inherent goods,” like railroads and cell towers, Europe’s

colonial mercantilism—including much of the slave trade and the modern weapons industry—would not have exploded without interest-based lending. Claiming interest bans were eliminated because they were impeding progress is like saying they were eliminated because they were impeding the starvation of twenty million Indians in the nineteenth century—true but hardly the impetus.

The idea that interest was banned because it is stealing time seems somewhat secondary. This overlooks the more obvious explanation. Interest was banned because it hurts, it's unhealthy, it causes problems, it's bad for a society. Another representative history of interest writes, "On the one hand, interest is despised and discouraged because it contributes to social inequality and does harm to the existing social order; on the other hand, it is justified because it plays a role in [the] . . . provision of capital."[64] Wait. Why is it justified? Because it provisions capital? This is justification for causing social inequality and harming the social order? Capital is more important than society?

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Another under-discussed factor plays a critical role in understanding the normalization of interest. While most discussions of the ethics of interest center on the exploitation of the poor through high-interest lending for consumption, medieval Christian scholars considered disbursing interest payments on held money sinful as well. As a 1312 statute in Florence prohibiting returns on deposits attests, "To receive interest on a bank deposit was severely condemned as usury."[65] That is, receiving a couple cents of interest a month on a savings account would have been legally and ethically impermissible. This aspect of Christian interest bans reveals much about their social motivation.

Permitting interest disbursements has the long-term effect of making the wealth of the poor increasingly worth less, thus manifesting exponentially increasing inequality and entrenching impoverishment. This suggests interest bans were meant not simply

to prevent the exploitation of the poor but also to prevent stratified inequality, a condition shown to sow social discord.[66] Interest bans seem designed to prevent both the further impoverishment of the poor and the further enrichment of the rich. Despite the deep theology, interest prohibitions may have developed simply to prevent the antagonism and aggression that comes with sharp class differences. This equal concern for accruing wealth and taking advantage of the poor suggests that perhaps the primary reason for interest bans is simply to prevent inequality.

The following chapter will discuss in greater depth the instruments used with increasing dexterity by multinational bankers from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries (notably the Medici, Fuggers, and Bank of England) to evade Church restrictions on interest. Chapter 5 will discuss the role of East Indian Companies of Britain and Holland in normalizing notions of perpetual economic growth through the development of new investment instruments and popularization of insurance. However, while all these instruments were indispensable in fueling nascent capitalism, underlying the invention of these techniques was a shift in sentiments that cannot be boiled down to some misguided ideas about human progress. “For almost a thousand years [interest] was understood to be something not conducive to economic well-being.”[67] What changed?

From John Calvin, who still believed interest charges were immoral for the needy, to John Locke, who mistakenly thought inequality was the cause of interest (instead of vice versa), advocates of interest legalization mounted diverse arguments from the sixteenth century onward. By the end of the nineteenth century, no respected writers insisted on maintaining total interest bans. Eugen Böhm-Bawerk’s 1884 work *Capital and Interest* is representative of dominant financial histories, describing arguments against interest as backward and irrational. They deride the moralizing tone of the scholastics, as though knowledge belongs outside morality.

“Usury prohibitions were part of the natural law tradition in Europe until the Enlightenment, when . . . jurists . . . demonstrated the finality of reason over moral sanctions.”[68] This accurately describes how

moral concerns were defeated by rationality and reason, suggesting that it is a settled matter that societies organized around reason are better than those organized around morality. Prior to the Enlightenment, good social behavior was guided by moral concerns. After the Enlightenment, good social behavior is guided by amoral rationality. “Strictly economic behavior—behavior stripped of its ‘moral’ content—is only to be found in capitalist society.”[69]

This dismissal of medieval scholarly thought epitomizes the tendency to look down upon knowledge that doesn’t contribute to economic growth. Likewise, the wealth destruction practices of Indigenous populations are called irrational—why destroy wealth? What kind of irrational person doesn’t love perpetual asymmetrical wealth accumulation?

Interest has had many connotations over the years, but a common understanding is that it is an exploitation of the poor by the wealthy. “The economy-wide effect of usury is to enable creditors to draw society’s wealth into their own hands.”[70] Interest transfers wealth from the many to the few. However, given that interest disbursements have also traditionally been banned, restrictions seem to be about more than just protecting the lower classes. Interest bans seem designed to prevent asymmetrical economies as much as preventing impoverishment. Perhaps, then, interest could be defined as *the systemization of inequality* (whether by rewarding the rich with interest disbursements or depriving the poor with fees or both simultaneously). A founding tenet of Abrahamic societies was that exacerbating inequality was forbidden, as has been the case in most societies. Today’s globally dominant society, however, is structured around the perpetual exacerbation of inequality.

Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité

“Remember, that money is of the prolific, generating nature. *Money can beget money*, and its offspring can beget more, and so on.”[71] Benjamin Franklin offers this near word-for-word contradiction of

Aristotle's sentiments on money, epitomizing the new amoral paradigm that emerged with Enlightenment-capitalist-humanist thought. Franklin is credited (perhaps apocryphally) with the two most interest-normalizing phrases ever uttered—"time is money" and "a penny saved is a penny earned." Few idioms could possibly do more to naturalize perpetual economic growth, but neither of these sayings are inherently true. They are made true by the way money is constructed in capitalized societies.

Franklin's amorality throughout his writing is startling. He is explicit in viewing morality as purely utilitarian. For Franklin, honesty is only virtuous in so far as it allows one to extend their credit. Failing to increase your wealth is a failure of duty. The purpose of life is to make money. Making money is an end in itself.[72] Franklin championed an egoism that put individual well-being before social well-being.[73]

These ideas are highly normalized today, but as Weber noted, Franklin's "sentiments would have been proscribed as the lowest sort of avarice and as totally lacking in self-respect by people in Middle Ages or classical times."[74] Luxemburg echoes, "In the modern world, most would agree with Benjamin Franklin's basic dictum that 'time is money'. . . . Until the Renaissance, time was considered as belonging to God . . . it was common property. . . . Charging for its use was immoral."[75]

Franklin's "individualist and utilitarian temper" espouses that virtue is whatever is useful in enriching oneself.[76] Franklin viewed himself as pursuing a most virtuous life, even working on a book entitled *The Art of Virtue* (one is reminded of Donald Trump's *The Art of the Deal*—both men's values are driven primarily by transactional relationships).[77] Indeed, for Franklin, virtue is artifice—the appearance of virtue is the same as virtue. This couldn't be more divorced from late medieval sentiments. By the 1300s, prohibitions on interest had evolved to indict even the unspoken hope of profiting from a loan, drawing on Luke 6:35, "Lend freely, *hoping* for nothing in return" (emphasis added).[78] That Franklin graces the hundred-dollar bill and that phrases like "making Benjamins" are slang for unapologetic pursuit of wealth is quite fitting.

Franklin was not alone in rewiring morality. His contemporary Adam Smith was simultaneously creating a new morality (the two most likely met and mingled in London between 1773 and 1775 in London).[79] Ironically, Smith, who wrote the book on capitalism (1776's *Wealth of Nations*) also wrote the book on morality (1759's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*). More than outlining a blueprint for capitalism, Smith's works made economic growth seem moral, seem natural. More than outlining what capitalism *is*, Smith legitimizes capitalism. Smith and Franklin succeeded in making the counterintuitive argument that being selfish is good for society. This obviously doesn't make any sense, but billions of people have come to believe and revere the insights of both men.

Smith's famous "invisible hand" has been interpreted by Rothschild as a sardonic joke, alluding to his and Franklin's under--discussed nihilistic streaks.[80] Truly, only in a world in which nothing matters would a society prioritize the pursuit of individual liberty above all other concerns. John Locke, an inspiration to both, admits interest is perfectly legitimate, "notwithstanding the opinion of some over-scrupulous men."[81] Such sentiments directly signal that scruples, morals, and ethics were increasingly being disregarded.

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Across the upper classes of the Eurowest, the Enlightenment liberal declaration of secular humanity's capacity to govern itself with reason and rationality had taken root by the early 1800s. This secular humanism underwrote the ideology of the French Revolution, which carried with it a rolling back of theological injunctions on a number of topics, usury among them. France was one of the last major European regions to adopt more permissive attitudes toward interest.[82]

Hobsbawm has asked why England came to dominate the Industrial Revolution given France's leading intellectual role or the greater resources of the Germanic states.[83] The short answer is interest. Many point to the steam engine as the preeminent tool of industrialization, but it was financing that truly launched

industrialization. Industrialization wasn't technological; it was financial. The exponential rise of factories and machines wouldn't have been possible without loans. Industrial colonialism was created by loans, not by steam engines. The Bank of England is more responsible for the Industrial Revolution than James Watt (steam engine innovator). England was the first polity to combine insurance, banking, and stock market activities, was among the first to legalize interest, and was the first to tenaciously privatize land (the Enclosures). In other words, English leaders were most ready to abandon morality as a factor in policy making. Until the Industrial Revolution, "questions relating to the economy were of a moral nature. . . . In the eighteenth century the economy achieved its autonomy and sought to become an instrument of cause and effect."[84]

While France was the last Western power to legalize interest, the practice was tacitly authorized in England and the Netherlands by the seventeenth century and had slowly and stealthily gained legitimacy in Spain, Italy, and the Germanic states by the mid- to late-eighteenth century. While interest had gained acceptance around the continent, it was the French Revolution that brought widespread legalization. The Napoleonic Codes of 1804 and 1807 legalized interest in France and the portion of the continent under Napoleonic rule stretching from Spain to Russia.[85] The steady 3 percent annual economic growth that has been operative for the past two-hundred-plus years neatly coincides with the legalization of charging and disbursing interest throughout most of continental European Christendom.

With the Napoleonic law codes, for the first time, distinctions were formalized between (legal) interest and (illegal) usury. Under these codes, usury came to be defined as interest over 5 percent. Lending fees under 5 percent were legal interest but remained morally questionable for much of the nineteenth century. "From an absolute prohibition, which treated all interest as usurious, we have developed a quantitative morality which determines legality by the rate. . . . Today these laws lack force either as social legislation or as religious command. They are virtually ignored and forgotten."[86] Even with the

introduction of legal interest, illicit usury (charges over 5 percent) appears to have been very poorly policed. Committing usury a single time was not even considered criminal. It was “serial usury” that was deemed illegal, which came to be defined as committing usury three or more times.

For much of nineteenth-century France, “the word ‘usurer’ was often used synonymously with the term ‘capitalist.’”[87] Key debates in the normalization of capitalism and usury in the nineteenth century turned on whether the usurer represented an aberrant, ill-willed capitalist or was rather the typical capitalist. “By 1850 . . . usury had become part of a larger debate about capitalism versus socialism, with critics of new usury regulation accusing their opponents of supporting ‘flagrant socialism’ by limiting the rights of lenders. Usury played a central role for many early socialists, who saw in the figure of the usurer not the antithesis of the good capitalist as he was framed in court cases but rather its epitome.”[88]

Thus, one of the ways interest-charging became normalized was to equate its ban with socialism and communism, which were seen by many as adversarial to Western pursuits from the late nineteenth century to today. Unorthodox economic thinker Silvio Gesell defined capitalism precisely as a system which exploits interest, lamenting that “Those who reject . . . liberty in economic life, must accept an economic system founded upon interest, that is, capitalism.”[89] To accept capitalism is to reject liberty in his view. “Gesell identified interest as the prime pathology of the capitalist system.”[90]

Gilded Rage

“The very conception of capital has not infrequently been based on [interest].”[91] To ban interest is to ban capitalization. In the early twentieth century, inspired by Silvio Gesell’s theories on “free-money” (*freigeld*), a handful of zero-interest experiments were undertaken. The name free-money signifies that, in interest-based lending, money costs money, whereas without interest, access to

money doesn't come with a fee. Gesell wanted to liberate money, *to free* money (from interest rates). "Freedom from interest must . . . be striven and fought for!"[92]

Gesell proposed a depreciating or "rusting" currency—money with a scheduled degradation—to prevent the asymmetrical accumulation of wealth. That is, instead of the poor paying a fee to access surplus money, the wealthy were essentially charged a fee for holding surplus money. Their held money would depreciate at set intervals. "Instead of paying interest to those who have more money than they need and in order to keep money in circulation, people should pay a small fee if they keep the money out of circulation."[93] Gesell was not motivated by any religious injunctions against interest. He just noticed that "the human race . . . had been physically, mentally, and spiritually degraded under capitalism" and sought alternatives.[94]

Free-money experiments were tried during the 1930s in communities in Austria, France, Germany, Spain, and Switzerland. In 1932 the Austrian town Wörgl experimented with a rusting currency. By all accounts it was successful, lifting the economic circumstances of townspeople across the socioeconomic spectrum. The rapid spending incentivized by the rusting currency promoted economic equality. However, the Wörgl experiment (like most similar efforts) was shut down after less than a year by the Austrian state for fears of impinging on sovereign power.

While the Wörgl experiment worked to reduce inequality, the rapid spending it inspired also very much encouraged economic growth. This economic growth was not asymmetrical as seen in interest-based economies, but the uptick in consumption was still in keeping with the environmentally deleterious impacts of capitalism. With *freigeld* you still have the problem of $500 cash in a shoebox losing value over time but in reverse. With the negative interest of rusting money, $500 becomes $400 over time. Whereas with regular interest, one must transform $500 into $600 in due time or else their holding will lose relative value.

Notably, Gesell saw intractable correlations between interest and conflict, "either interest and war, or earned income and peace."[95] He indicates that interest drives the pursuit of ever more resources,

which can lead to aggressive competition, and that interest induces social rifts. Under Gesell's program "wealth would not grow automatically through interest accruals."[96] Keynes had much sympathy for Gesell's ideas, incorrectly predicting that in the long run Gesell would be more widely remembered than Marx.

Rosa Luxemburg, writing at the same time as Gesell, articulated many of capitalism's irrationalities, particularly concerning excess and growth. "The aim of capitalist production is not a surplus value pure and simple . . . but a surplus value ever growing into larger quantities, surplus value ad infinitum."[97] When that growth is impeded, conflict and war often emerge. One could offer this as a diagnosis for the outbreak of World War I—the German economy was growing so rapidly that it was running into impediments to its ability to continue this rate of growth.[98] While continent-wide conflicts have been rare over the past eighty years, the hostilities engendered by perpetual economic growth are played out in proxy wars and outsourced to the majority world (Global South).[99]

Post-Collapse Theory

"Compound interest is the eighth wonder of the world. He who understands it, earns it . . . he who doesn't, pays it." This criminally abused quote, common among motivational finance gurus, has been variously attributed to Einstein, Rockefeller, Rothschild, and even Napoleon. Minimal sleuthing suggests the quote first appeared in a newspaper ad for a bank in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* in 1925. The quote is a psychological ploy to entice potential investors, suggesting that if they're smart (they understand compound interest), they will give their money to the bank so it can grow.

Truly understanding compound interest, however, is to understand that we are all paying it all the time, not earning it. It is built into every purchase we make.[100] To truly understand interest is to understand that 80 percent of the population pays interest to the top 10 percent.[101] To truly understand compound interest is to understand

that it produces an asymmetrical growth of wealth in which, if your wealth grows less than 3 percent per year (on average), you actually become poorer over the long run.

This is the math of capitalism's asymmetrical growth. The wealth of the rich grows faster and greater, the effect of which is to entrench poverty. Margrit Kennedy's 2000 study shows that the poorest 2.5 million German households paid €1.8 billion in interest, whereas the richest 2.5 million households received €34.2 billion. Crucially, this is why paying out interest disbursements on held money was considered equally sinful as charging interest on loans by thirteenth and fourteenth-century scholastics.

Interest is factored into nearly every modern purchase. Interest is "channeled from the consumer . . . to the possessor of money because producers and merchants would have to include the costs of borrowed capital in their retail price."[102] Gesell elaborates on how interest made it impossible for average early-twentieth-century workers to build extra wealth: "Precisely because of the interest which workers must raise for others, the proceeds of labor are so reduced that for most workers saving is an impossibility. So if interest is an incentive, it is still more an obstacle to saving. Interest limits the possibility of saving among workers . . . If interest falls to zero the proceeds of labor rise by the whole amount of the burden of interest."[103] His argument is that eliminating interest engenders greater economic equality. Interest produces inequality. There are many ways to grow wealth, but interest is the key to growing it unequally.

In the ongoing four-thousand-year struggle to variously suppress and unleash interest, it is amply evident that polities that deploy interest liberally (e.g., the Babylonians, the Roman Empire, or Eurocolonizers) expand rapidly and develop extreme hierarchies, inducing widespread poverty and highly concentrated superfluous wealth. Some of this superfluous wealth is spent on public works projects like temples, coliseums, universities, roads, or skyscrapers—the stuff that archaeologists see, the stuff that obscures impoverishment. This superfluous wealth cannot be used to eliminate poverty and inequality. Poverty and inequality are the

necessary preconditions for generating superfluous wealth. Superfluous wealth is accumulated through inequitably distributing resources. It is almost so tautological that it barely registers, but there cannot be billionaires without large-scale impoverishment. Superfluous wealth is the cause (and never the cure) of poverty and inequality.

Among people and places that successfully restrict the practice of usury, more egalitarian forms of social organization tend to emerge. There is neither great wealth nor great poverty. While many may genuinely prefer the superfluous wealth and middle-class illusions of unleashed interest to the class homogeny of an interest-less society, a critical distinction is that excess wealth—its accumulation and consumption—requires the continuous exploitation and extraction of copious resources (human and mineral) and is thus highly volatile. Groups that believe in and practice the aggregation and concentration of power and wealth cannot contain themselves. They constantly pull more wealth toward themselves. Interest-based societies must perpetually expand. If they cannot, they stop existing (voluntarily or involuntarily).

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From the financial collapse of 2008 to the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, federal interest rates were held at extremely low levels—near zero. The thinking behind that policy is that low interest rates should encourage borrowing and investment to get the economy moving after recessions, with attendant concerns of inflation if the spending and investing carry on too long. That is, in the supply-and-demand of money, there is more supply than demand, so money is being offered at cheap rates (approaching Gesell's free-money).

However, empirical evidence suggests interest rate tinkering doesn't cause movements in the economy. Rather, it follows them.[104] This was made amply clear in 2023–24: as inflation took off, interest followed it upward. After inflation abated, interest rates followed it downward.[105] Here the interest rate movement didn't *cause* anything. Rather the inverse. Economist Richard Werner offers the heterodox

argument that inflation causes changes in the interest rate, not vice versa. Inflation occurs, then central banks respond by raising the interest rate.

While ostensibly the extended low interest rates of the 2010s were intended to induce spending, their primary effect was to expand indebtedness. As debts become investment vehicles, the goal is to create as much debt and indebted people as possible—"the extension of personal credit to all of us in the forms of student loans, mortgages and credit cards . . . has papered over the declining real value of wages since the 1980s."[106] As has been widely noted, "Contemporary economic reason is infused with an awareness that living without debt has become a practical impossibility."[107]

One result of this has been the further financialization of precarity. It is lucrative to make people precarious. The precarious are likely to require financing at some point, and the greater the precarity the greater the exploitation one will accept. Of course, "there is no such thing as non-precarious capitalism."[108]

Islamic Banking

With much debated success, global Islamic banking has developed over the past fifty years with the promise of conducting interest-free economic activity in compliance with Sharia law. Some Islamic banks have designed complex financial arrangements that many critics suggest mimic the negative social effects of Western banking—facilitating the perpetual, inequitable growth of wealth. In this regard, they're similar to the maneuvers of the Medici Bank in the fifteenth century (see chapter 3). Such efforts try to overcome restrictions on interest by exploiting semantic quirks, rather than contemplating the sentiment behind the prohibition—that perpetual unequal growth of wealth corrodes social relations. This characterization does not hold for all instantiations of Islamic banking, and scholars, theologians, and bankers are currently divided over these concerns.

The existence of Islamic banking illustrates that the idea of

banking without interest is not totally absurd but rather is currently being attempted by millions of people holding billions of dollars. While there are yawning disagreements on how best to practice Islamic banking, examining some of the sentiments helps us imagine worlds outside of interest.

Several volumes on the history and mechanics of Islamic banking exist at this point.[109] Today's brand of modern Islamic banking usually traces its genesis to the 1970s. As Islamic communities were increasingly coerced into the globalizing economy, it became apparent that the norms of European economics conflicted with some core values of practicing Muslims. To be clear, Judaism and Christianity ostensibly share these core values, but different emphases on fairness, equitability, and justice have developed (or been enforced) among the Abrahamic traditions. Nearly every admonishment against European banking norms in the Quran is echoed in the Torah and Bible.

All the arguments discussed above for why interest may be considered sinful have also been offered in Islam (e.g., interest is theft of time, etc.). Some have posited that dealing, negotiating, and commerce are more entwined in the fabric of Islamic social relations. For some Islamic scholars, "negotiation" is a primary condition of any contract, serving as something like informed consent.[110] Shariah actually views commercial and financial activities positively in that they are methods of circulating wealth and preventing asymmetrical accumulation. "This is based on the principle that wealth should not be concentrated and hence circulated in the hands of a few and instead goes into all sectors of the economy."[111]

The key distinction between Islamic and Western finance today is that Islamic finance is explicitly concerned with the theological--ethical implications and repercussions of banking, whereas Western banking is explicitly amoral and secular. This is not to assert that Islamic banking *is* always more ethical than Western but rather that it is (ostensibly) obligated to factor ethical considerations into any financial decisions, while Western banking is under no such obligation (Western bankers may voluntarily choose to consider ethics, but it's optional). "The conceptual framework of accounting

currently applied in the West finds its justification in a dichotomy between business morality and private morality."[112] There is no such distinction in Islamic banking. "Islam does not accept the Western concept that economics is divorced from morality."[113]

The Arabic word *riba* is most often translated as *interest*—it is referred to negatively in the Quran at least twenty times.[114] *Riba* translates precisely to "increase," suggesting that it is the pursuit of increase (accumulation, growth) that is frowned upon. "While earlier there was a debate as to whether *riba* relates to interest or usury, there now appears to be consensus of opinion among Islamic scholars that the term extends to all forms of interest . . . and that the Islamic injunction is not only against exorbitant or excessive interest, but also against a minimal rate of interest."[115]

Siddiqui writes, "It is important to understand why *riba* was condemned."[116] Sadly, despite registering its importance, Siddiqui doesn't offer an answer to why *riba* was condemned. Indeed, the search for the "epistemological reason for its prohibition" is the main question at issue.[117] If this was known with precision, it would obviate many theological debates of the past millennium.

The key mechanical difference between the functioning of Islamic and Western finance is that "Islam endorses risk sharing as opposed to 'risk transfer.'"[118] Anthropologist Daromir Rudnyckyj expands on this distinction: "Proponents of [Islamic banking] admitted that economic growth in a financial system based on equity investment would likely be more modest, but they felt that this would be a small price to pay for greater stability and coherence. . . . Furthermore, slower growth would likely lead to less economic inequality, as elites would not be able to multiply their wealth as quickly."[119] That is, Islamic banking prioritizes social and economic stability over rapidity and volume of growth.

As with interest in European history, there are persistent assertions that prohibitions against *riba* "impeded economic development in many Islamic countries."[120] This view equates development with a teleological Eurowestern ethic of maximal accumulation. "Without credit facilities at reasonable rates of interest, progress was stalled until the moral and economic climate

changed."[121] Such sentiments make clear that "progress" requires a lack of concern for morals—a change in the moral climate from one in which morals are relevant in economic behavior to one in which they are not.

It is also notable that much writing on Islamic finance (whether by Muslim or Western scholars) refers to European banking as "conventional banking," reifying the "naturalness" of Euroglobal economic preeminence. Likewise, there is a tendency for some to speak of the "real economy" in reference to the Western economy and the "Islamic economy" operating adjacent to this "real economy," as though Islamic banking isn't real.

There is, however, a schism over what Islamic finance should be and what it actually is. Some think Islamic banking is an effort to pursue the same ends as Western banks by employing novel mechanisms to overcome religious injunctions. Others think Islamic finance is a genuine effort to discard the values and priorities of Western economics to craft a more ethical and just form of finance.[122] Within this large schism, there are those who believe the current structure of Islamic finance is too Western—not ethical enough. And vice versa—that Islamic finance is currently too concerned with morals and should be more like Western banking.

While some have floated the idea that Islamic banking can, more or less, just be Western banking without interest, the "concept that the removal of the element *riba* would convert secular banking into Islamic banking is a fallacy. The two are different because they are products of two distinct philosophies. One is based on the law of the jungle, where you either eat or you are eaten. The other is based on the timeless and divine principles that are universally applicable."[123] Crucial to this distinction, is (ideally) when conducting business in Islamic banking, the actors assume fairness; they do not assume to be engaged in a dog-eat-dog transaction where the other party is working against their interests.

Regardless, it is widely recognized that Islamic financial tools that developed between 1970 and 1990 were "patterned after Western products."[124] To elaborate, Mohamad Laldin writes that some Islamic scholars

> feel that the banking practices that merely satisfy the legal requirements in contracts and products (that is, merely Shari'ah compliant) are not sufficient. It is argued that Islamic banking has the potential to offer a new perspective and approach in banking practices beyond the realm of halal (permitted) finance. The industry should essentially be directed into that desired direction by designing products not merely to be compliant but consistent with the objective of serving people with transparent financial transactions.[125]

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Some Islamic bankers believe that the Sharia interpretations and practices coming from the Middle East are more "authentic" and truer to the faith than those from Southeast Asia. Gulf countries "perceive their version of Islam as the epitome of religious authenticity."[126] Contributing to this perception, Malaysia has aggressively pursued economic growth over the past couple decades.

Malaysian bankers complain about the lack of financial ingenuity among their Middle Eastern counterparts: "We know that it is stated in the Qur'an, for example, that you cannot do *riba*, but how can you not do *riba* in the current world? So that is why we come up with a lot of innovative products and services. . . . On the Middle East side they know that we cannot do *riba*, but they don't come up with innovative ideas on how to address those issues."[127]

These sentiments reinforce the cynical notion of Islamic finance being simply a reflection of Western finance with different words.[128] "Most Islamic finance experts acknowledge that these contracts obey the letter of religious injunctions but do not conform to their spirit. Because they effectively replicate interest-bearing loans through the deferred payment and marked up price."[129] Indeed, most Islamic risk-"sharing" contracts are pegged to prevailing global interest rates (~3 percent).

Troublingly, some major international banks offer both Western and Islamic banking services at the same branch, raising questions regarding the integrity of the money, particularly when issues of

purity are crucial to Sharia compliance. Some of these global banks simply have an expert come in to help make otherwise Western deals appear Islamic. Many Islamic scholars advocating for reform "see contemporary Islamic finance as little more than conventional finance adorned with a thin and mostly transparent Islamic veneer."[130] Some have even referred to Islamic banking as an "innovative *growth* market."[131]

Given these critiques, some view the emergence of Islamic banking in the 1970s and '80s as a missed opportunity to start from scratch with an entirely novel form of ethics-based banking. More than the "modest goal of making a capitalism that is less destructive and more humane," some sought to fundamentally "challenge the epistemology of finance."[132] In the view of one Islamic economist, "Islamic finance, like conventional finance, disproportionately benefited the wealthy who held investment portfolios . . . In contrast . . . authentic Islamic finance was an instrument to reduce poverty and improve the welfare of the less fortunate."[133]

Many Islamic bankers have also naturalized Western economic "laws" regarding supply and demand, inflation, and deflation.[134] If Islamic banking is truly to escape the amorality of capital, it would seem necessary to break these assumptions. While naive orthodox economists may insist that "scarcity, cost, preferences, opportunities, etc.—are truly universal in applicability," ethnographic evidence shows that such assertions are simply false.[135] Many populations don't perceive themselves as living in a world of scarce resources, nor do they make decisions based on cost-benefit analyses.[136]

Some scholars interpret *riba* bans to be a comment on human failings. Mahmoud El-Gamal, for example, suggests that Islamic finance is designed to "guide the believer away from his or her own inconsistencies toward efficiency . . . God gave humanity the Quran to enhance economic efficiency, and economic efficiency is the sign and seal of divine justice."[137] Why should we imagine that God favors efficiency (no matter how broadly construed), let alone economic efficiency?

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Crucially, under Islamic finance, insurance (as practiced by Western institutions) is also not permissible. “From the viewpoint of Islamic law, the basic objection to conventional insurance is that it is effectively a gamble upon the incidence of the contingency insured against, because the interests of both parties are diametrically opposed.”[138] In lieu of insurance (as understood in Christian capitalism), Islamic finance employs the notion *takaful* that is more akin to a mutual aid society, providing for “mutual financial aid and assistance to the participants in case of need.”[139] Islamic financial thinkers have identified that, in Western insurance, the insurance company plays the role of “the house” in a casino and the insured is playing the role of the gambler. “The gain for the ‘House’ is always certain, while the gain for the bettor is doubtful; the person may gain or lose. Overall, the ‘House’ is against gamblers, and the insurance company is against the insured.”[140]

Any system of finance guided by Abrahamic principles should provision for the impoverished. In Islam, everyone is supposed to be guaranteed a fair standard of living, *nisab*.[141] One of the ways this is achieved, at least theoretically, is through *zakat*, a compulsory form of giving. One is obliged to give away one-fortieth (2.5 percent) of their yearly gains. Giving *zakat* is less like charity and more like a baseline activity needed to purify one’s own wealth—wealth is dirty (thus useless) if you don’t give away (purify) at least 2.5 percent of it.

A revealing aspect of Abrahamic religions is that riskless investment (i.e., certain gain) is prohibited in religious texts, but so too are gambling, games of chance, and speculation. Some may see this as a contradiction: you’re not supposed to make money on either riskless or risky investments. I would suggest, however, taking these injunctions at face value and interpreting these two prohibitions to mean that you’re not supposed to try to grow money at all. If you’re not supposed to make money on risk-free investments or risk-full investments, if you’re not supposed to make certain gains or uncertain gains, perhaps the point is that we’re not supposed to grow

wealth at all.

"The essence of usury is that whether the borrower gains or loses, it is certain that the lender always takes his pound of flesh."[142] This gets to what seems to be at the heart of the pan-Abrahamic interest prohibition and the concurrent prohibition of "riskless investments." Interest creates a relationship which severs the cultivation of mutually beneficial outcomes. Ethnographic work on non-capitalist exchange reveals methods of social organization that, through a variety of complex structures, has the ultimate effect of manifesting the desire for mutually beneficial outcomes. Competitive gifting among the Māori, for example, cultivates reciprocal wishes of good fortune among trading partners—the better my partner is doing, the better the gift I get! Lending at interest has the opposite effect; it systematizes antagonism, divorcing people's desired outcomes from that of their neighbors and trading partners.

Fear of Hell

Interest divides people, creates social divisions and inequities. Sure, calling interest sinful sounds silly for the atheists among us, but taboos usually arise for a reason. While discerning the precise motivations behind historical interest bans may remain out of reach (because there is no single motivation), the effect of such bans is plainly visible—it manifests more equitable and less exploitative polities. Interest is depraved not because God hates loans or investments but instead because accelerating asymmetrical economic growth deteriorates social bonds and community trust. Interest prohibitions developed in communities that saw how the accumulation of wealth is built on exploitation and inequality.

Geisst is explicit: "In the West, the battle with ethics had been won by finance . . . as the economic growth needed to serve a growing population trumped ethical and moral precepts surrounding lending practices."[143] Ethical and moral precepts have been defeated in the "battle" with finance. Geisst and colleagues write such sentences in

a matter-of-fact style that seems to find this a perfectly acceptable turn of events. That the wants and desires of the finance industry have “trumped ethical and moral precepts” seems like it should be a bigger deal, doesn’t it? It seems like there should have been a vote on this or that it should be discussed more openly.

The social barrier that served to contain the perpetually accelerating asymmetrical growth of wealth—interest restrictions—was dismantled over the preceding centuries. At present, there are no social, political, economic, moral, or mechanical tools at our disposal (to say nothing of desire or will) to contain the growth of wealth.

While this chapter has illustrated vacillations in public, theological, and commercial attitudes toward interest over the past millennia, in the end it was never the legislation (whether sacred or profane) that restrained interest but rather its perceived immorality. Clever bankers can always work around laws. “As medieval men knew well, they could sin in this life without the State being able to punish them, but they damned themselves for eternity. The real force of the usury law lay in its hold on men’s souls, and there no evasion was possible.”[144]

The normalization of interest over the past centuries co-occurred with a pervasive disbelief in the legitimacy of morality as a behavioral guide. On the Christian merchants entering into interest-based lending, Le Goff concludes, “it was not the earthly consequences of the Church’s condemnation of usury that restrained them, on the threshold of capitalism; it was the agonizing fear of Hell.”[145]

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20 Gelpi and Julien-Labruyère, *The History of Consumer Credit*, 12.

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Chapter Three: A Flat Expanse (Banking)

A bench. A table. A surface upon which to conduct activities, preferably flat. Like the Great Plains of North America, a good table gives the appearance of evenness, an equitable spread. Flatness and equality are conceptually entwined. Those sitting around a table, whether to dine or conduct business, often presume an aspect of equitability. It is from the “table” or “bench” (*banca* in Italian) that we derive the modern concept of banking. As with any etymology worth mentioning, however, this one betrays some misdirection. When banking we may sit down at an even table to do business with the expectation of a fair exchange, but we must remember that the owner of the table holds a significant advantage over their counterpart. To own the surface is to control in whose favor it slants.

It is the prerogative, the job, of banks to exploit and exacerbate the inequality between wealth-holders and wealth-needers. The bank grows its wealth through manipulating their client’s wealth (sometimes the client’s wealth grows too, but this isn’t why banks exist). It is this exploitation and exacerbation of inequality around which this book circles (recall the previous chapter’s characterization of interest as the amplification of inequality). The bank’s exploitation of inequality can be performed at many scales, from relatively benign and mutually beneficial local dealings to globally catastrophic predation that funnels trillions of dollars of public wealth to transnational megabanks. In many traditions, exploitation, particularly the exploitation of inequitable access to resources, may be considered unethical. However, in today’s dominant economy not only is this practice not considered unethical; it is compulsory.

This chapter dissects the normalization of banking (the

formalization of interest). In this discussion, I highlight pivots in banking history that illustrate how violent, detrimental, and inequitable pursuits became normalized through banking. Throughout, the focus is on banks' function as lenders.

Since the rise of modern banking around the fifteenth century, and concurrent inequitable hierarchization, there have been groups constructed as scapegoats to distract from or blame for the inequity of the banking economy. In the worst cases these groups are targeted for eradication through mass murder. It may be jarring to suggest that banking *caused* the genocides of Indigenous Americans or European Jews, but the slave trade, the European colonization of the Americas, and World War II would not have occurred without banking.

Lending was indispensable to Atlantic slavery. "In the second half of the eighteenth century, traders paid for nearly 70 percent of goods used to purchase Africans on credit. . . . Thus English banking grew largely in response to the needs of such merchants and financiers. . . . The proliferation of banks in [Liverpool, London, and Bristol] in the second half of the eighteenth century was almost entirely due to bill discounting business connected to the trade in Africans."[1]

Likewise, as rich as they are, Chevron, Exxon, or BP wouldn't extract fossil fuels without loans. Today "almost every enterprise works on borrowed capital of one shape or another."[2] All large-scale warfare over the past six hundred years has been, one way or another, dependent on loans and debts (either to sovereigns or insurgents). The Bank of England was born out of war debts, and unpaid war debts were a primary cause of the Medici Bank's collapse.

Modernity and the Medici

As detailed in the previous chapter, perceptions and regulations surrounding interest have vacillated significantly for millennia. Until the nineteenth century, nearly all writing on the subject equated

usury with interest—to charge interest whatsoever is to commit the sin of usury. Is this a big deal? Social mores, like fashions, shift over time. Why so much concern over the comparative social acceptability of interest through time? First, since people have been concerned with the subject for four thousand years, it seems like one aspect of social organization we should try to get right. Second, the distinction (or lack thereof) between usury and interest is at the heart of modern banking. That is, acceptance of interest was *the* prerequisite for banking as we know it.

Modern banking practices only became legal by separating interest from usury. If, as was the case in 1300, there was no distinction between the two, modern banking would be illegal. Banking as we know it wasn't invented in early modernity; it was just legalized. The practices, tools, and mechanics of modern banking developed as a response to the illegality of interest. The complexity of today's derivatives market is descended from fifteenth-century efforts to evade usury prohibitions. Contrary to many histories of banking that emphasize innovations in fiscal instruments, it is not the new tools that define modern banking so much as the shift in legality, the shift in what is considered socially acceptable fiscal activity. Practices that were deemed unsavory and socially corrosive in 1300 became slowly normalized by 1900. Over the course of six hundred years, bankers terraformed the moral landscape to make the charging of interest seem not only normal but beneficial.

At the height of anti-usury sentiment, from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, modern banking emerged. It is difficult to believe the peak of public vitriol toward usury and the emergence of modern banking are not correlated. An easy connection to derive is that the emergence of Early Modern banking practices induced new stresses on the population, which spurred more vocal protests against usury. This picture is complicated, however, by some disagreement over whether anti-usury sentiment was driven predominately from the bottom up by the masses or from the top down by the Church.[3]

Whether you believe the Church was operating out of a pious concern for social well-being or to preserve its hold on power against the rising merchant class from the thirteenth century to the

nineteenth, the Church constantly struggled to keep up with increasingly clever and convoluted arrangements of bankers to extract interest. In Genoa, Church usury restrictions pushed the city-state toward more secular governance.[4] By the nineteenth century, with increasing secularization of European governments, the Church quietly stepped away from the battle. Henceforth, the definition of usury would be decided by civic governments rather than the Church. In 1804, France, under Napoleon, defined usury as any interest over 5 percent on the principle of a loan, a standard that was instituted across much of the continent.

The Medici Bank was the biggest of the fifteenth century. Its rise and fall are illustrative of how modern banking continues to operate. From a field of several local banking operations in fourteenth-century Italy, the Medici emerged in 1397 to monopolize the Italian peninsula and much of the continent's largest accounts. By 1494, the bank was dissolved, largely due to unrecouped loans to Europe's monarchs.

The economy constructed in the wake of the Medici set the table for colonialism, privatization, slavery, and industrialization. The most enduring achievement of the Medici, though, may have been to cultivate doubt as to what exactly constituted usury. Bankers were trying to obfuscate this distinction before, but the Medici elevated the practice to an extent that, following them, it would be difficult to conceive of a European economy that did not rely on usurious lending, as remains the case today.

This feat was accomplished primarily by the manipulation of bills of exchange and other negotiable instruments. These devices were pitched as a manner of wealth insurance for the aristocratic class. Rather than loans at interest, they were pitched as a form of insurance for nobles, merchants, or clergy, guaranteeing that their 100 florins in June in Florence would have the same purchasing power in pounds in London in December. For this assurance, the Medici garnered a fee (usually). "Merchants, when signing bills of exchange, combined foreign exchange with credit to conceal the interest rates in terms of an inflated exchange rate."[5] It's not as though the theologians were totally duped by the deceptions of the Medici and their ilk, but they lacked the legal vocabulary to prosecute

such dealings. “The scholastics were not oblivious of the possibility and called. . . . a disguised loan a contract *in fraudem usurarum*.”[6]

The critical element of this operation is that, in taking advantage of the fluctuations in the exchange rate, the Medici introduced an element of risk into their lending. There was always the possibility the Medici could fail to profit or indeed take a loss on any negotiable instrument if there was unforeseen volatility in the exchange rates. This element of risk is what made such financial tools legal. As historian Raymond De Roover notes, “it was usury to make a *certain* profit on a loan, no matter whether the profit was great or small.”[7] It is the *expectation* of gain which truly marks usurious activity. With the invention of risk, the Medici could plausibly say they did not know they would profit from their bills of exchange.

Interest is an exploitation of the future, thus profiting from interest demands skill at projecting, constructing, or controlling the future. “The viability of modern banking is premised on the element of ineradicable uncertainty in the dynamics of economic interaction. Without uncertainty, we would have no need for either banks or the promises they issue.”[8] As discussed in chapter 4, though, it could equally be said that without banks we would have no need for uncertainty (risk). That is, risk was invented to make bankers’ gains appear uncertain.

As the fifteenth century belonged to the Medici, the sixteenth belonged to the Germanic Fugger Bank. The Fugger’s enterprise was less volatile than the Medici and ultimately more lucrative. They arguably had more impact on the infrastructural hegemony of financial thinking. By making savings accounts more widely available, the Fuggers broadened the scope of who banked, normalizing banking for a wider swath of the population. Prior to the 1500s, banking services were used almost exclusively by those with surplus money (aristocrats, clergy, and merchants). After the Fuggers, the services of banks were utilized across classes. Like the Medici, the Fuggers maintained close ties to religious authorities, engendering sympathetic treatment on potential transgressions of usury laws.

That bankers had to conduct their primary function, lending at

interest, under a subterfuge suggests their activities were unwanted and socially detrimental. Laws and regulations are usually designed to forbid activities that have unwanted results, but there are often methods of attaining these undesirable results that are not unlawful—attaining illicit ends through licit means. Sometimes this requires creating new technologies or new concepts. The increasingly complex financial instruments that developed from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries were not explicitly banned in Canon Law (because they were unknown in earlier centuries). There is no law, for example, that explicitly prohibits you from giving me $20 today in exchange for me telling you in five years where I previously buried $30. In such a hypothetical exchange, you would be buying access to future information. Such a scheme may not have been flagged as usurious by authorities, though in spirit it violates the prohibition.

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The complex financial instruments in use today directly descend from these banking practices in that they attempt to achieve socially undesirable ends through legal means. For the past six hundred years, bankers have been faster than regulators. Just as the Medici began installing themselves in positions of political power, frequently today the bankers are the regulators. Banking continues to strive to attain, by legal means, outcomes that have been legislatively deemed harmful. At the end of the day, while the Medici faced thousands of accusations of usury, from peasants to monarchs, they were (usually) found innocent of actual violations of anti-usury laws. As the chorus of accusations suggest, popular consensus was that, while they may not have breached the letter of the law, they certainly transgressed its spirit.

Sixteenth-century theologian Martín de Azpilcueta made the obvious but important observation, “All contracts that are unequal are unjust.”[9] This raises the even more obvious question: why can’t injustice simply be illegal? This is so simple it sounds tautological.[10] Interest bans were put in place because charging interest is unjust, but rather than ban exploitative, inequitable, and unjust financial

interactions, Abrahamic sanctions developed circuitous prohibitions on the abstract notion of stealing time (see chapter 2). In the last few centuries of discussion regarding the ethics of charging interest in the Abrahamic faiths, there is a pedantic focus on the wording of prohibitions that is transparently intended to elide the spirit of the injunctions.

Despite the eradication (or fecklessness) of moral concerns over interest, scholars from Max Weber to Richard Tawney have lamented that bans on usury were *too successful*. Religious bans on usury hampered an earlier emergence of capitalism. If not for "superstitious" disapproval of usury, Europe could have begun widespread exploitation centuries earlier. Geisst's word choices in the following sentence signal teleological gratitude for today's inequitable status quo: "The abrupt end of the Templars had a *positive* side by necessitating the rise of other lenders and bankers, leading to the establishment of an early banking system in Europe."[11] Describing fifteenth-century scholastic Sant'Antonino's opposition to the legality of the bills of exchange, De Roover cautions that if the saint's advice (including banning interest disbursements on held money) was followed, it "would have abolished banking altogether"—an admonition meant to sound absurd.[12]

Some economic historians unapologetically applaud early bankers and their methods of subverting regulations. Those that cheer Medici fiscal ingenuity do so because they believe usury prohibitions to be unnecessary or detrimental. They feel that, despite subverting the law, the Medici actions improved European society. Are the Medici to be applauded because they paved the way for today's normalized banking system? The Medicis are applauded because they acted like modern bankers (i.e., modern bankers see a bit of themselves in the Medicis). By applauding the Medicis on the grounds that they were the first modern bankers, admirers are subtly incriminating modern banking; acknowledging that modern banking *is* the practice of getting around the law to attain socially undesirable ends through legal means.

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While the rise of European antisemitism correlates with the normalization of banking over the past seven centuries, it is important to be precise about the causality here because this correlation has led to much misguided hate (if there's any other kind). While certainly one can find localized outbreaks of anti-Jewish sentiment going back 2,500 years, it is a misconception that antisemitic hostilities prevailed throughout the past 2,000 years in Europe. Anti-Jewish sentiment was not dominant in Europe from year zero through the thirteenth century. Anti-Jewish rhetoric gained traction with the Church's increased crackdowns on interest, which co-occurred with the rise in interest-based lending among *Christians*.

Anti-Jewish sentiment began to rise as usury became more prevalent and social inequality began to grow. This growing inequality led to the creation of Jews as scapegoats for the crumbling social equilibrium. Yes, antisemitism and banking (the growth of wealth) are intricately bound but not in the xenophobic manner traditionally presented. The rise of antisemitic rhetoric in Europe during the Early Modern period with the transition to a money and banking economy was due to scapegoating. Jews, even the relative few who operated in financial sectors, did not cause the veneration of wealth accumulation and subsequent deterioration of a more equitable social system. Jews did not cause the mass alienation and dispossession of the peasant class.

With the rise of the money economy, banking, and the asymmetrical growth of wealth, people's lives became tangibly worse.[13] Thus, those seeking to normalize the detrimental growth of wealth needed to develop a narrative to explain why people's lives were deteriorating. It became the marginalized and disempowered Jewish population (and witches in the sixteenth century), not the self-enriching aristocratic class, that was ruining everyone's life.

Private Ownership, Public Outrage

The increased normalization of banking in EuroChristendom introduced novel notions of property. Banking's ideologies of value, wealth, and amorality (the avoidance of morality) helped facilitate and normalize private property and the attendant violence of privatization. Notions of property and ownership, notions of maximal extraction and maximal profit developed out of the fiscal activities of Early Modern banking. Modern banking was a prerequisite for modern property relations, and private property has been pivotal for perpetually accelerating economic growth.

Private property as it is understood today was practically unknown in the medieval period. "Historians have been unable to find a clear definition of 'property' in English legal writings prior to the eighteenth century."[14] The Church *oversaw* a lot of land, and the nobles *oversaw* a lot of land, but "overseeing" did not grant exclusive rights to usage (and profit), as ownership does today. Despite several centuries of steadfast resistance from peasant classes, today private property is valorized as an indispensable social virtue. "Many historians consider the hallmark of Western civilization to be private property."[15] Former vice president Mike Pence, when announcing the birth of the US Space Force, highlighted the prerogative to "carry American ideals into the boundless expanse of space. . . . While other nations increasingly possess the capability to operate in space, not all of them share our commitment to freedom, *private property*, and the rule of law."

For Pence, private property *is* freedom. Similarly, for Adam Smith civilization *is* private property.[16] For most people, however, in most places at most times, the exact opposite has been true—private property has entailed the stripping of agency, limiting of choices, and concentrated hierarchical control. Comninel affirms that "the peasantry owned almost twice the amount of land as the nobility in the ancient regime."[17]

It is striking that so many today consider private property the key to autonomy and personal freedom, when it was the implementation of private property that took away the capacity for self-sufficiency. In reviewing the deterioration of social conditions across ancient societies, economist Michael Hudson argues that "the common

denominator from Babylonia to Byzantium was the transfer of subsistence land to large property owners."[18] Key to making everything in the world "ownable" or "buyable" is the way banks lend and inscribe value. Privatized land can be financialized. Not just its output (crops or commodities), the land itself becomes a securitized asset, which can also be "foreclosed" upon by banks if the owner fails to grow the economy sufficiently (give enough money to the bank).

Anything you own can be taken from you. Ownership manifests its opposite: alienation, confiscation, estrangement. However, you cannot be excluded from unowned land or resources. Ownership is the legalization and legitimization of exclusive access.[19] "Giving squatters in villages or urban slums legal title is a precondition for stripping them of their customary rights. . . . Forfeiture is the aim, of course! Registering customary land tenure in the holder's name is the first step toward making it transferable to creditors."[20] Hudson adds that there are trillions of dollars to be made off the slums and shantytowns of Brazil by formally titling and mortgaging them. Land was not traditionally something that could be bought and sold, though it could be acquired through indebtedness. And the best way to indebt someone is through interest.

The normalization of private property is most evident in the English Enclosure Movement. Enclosure "involved extinguishing common rights and unifying multiple claims to land and its resources under a single landowner who then had the right to exclude . . . other users."[21] Beginning in the fourteenth century but intensifying every following century, the enclosing (privatizing) of land is deeply implicated in the naturalization of exploitation, both of humans and environments. Ashley Dawson has framed the looming Sixth Great Extinction as a result of the global enclosure movement.[22] Utopian Thomas More argued that enclosure caused economic inequality, crime, and social dislocation.[23]

Pre-enclosure, social organization was not based on individual rights but rather on community well-being.[24] Thus, the language and philosophy of individuals and their rights needed to be developed by characters such as John Locke. The unassailable value of

individuality was developed in the Enlightenment, particularly by those who thought highly of themselves—the aristocrats. Rather than emancipation from absolutist monarchs, as is often preached, the story of post-eighteenth-century politics has been the rise of private, commercial power.

The spread of private property relied on interest.[25] Most private property is acquired through financing (lending) of some manner. Once the bank owns your debt, they hold claim over any other collateral wealth you may possess. “Enforcing the bank’s right to repossess an asset is as important as recognising the owner’s right to possess it.”[26] When private property became widespread, the seventeenth-century farmer approaching proto-middle class could either buy it or rent it. Either way, you had to give all your money to rich people or migrate to the city and sell yourself (to rich people). “Rent is the most glorious, most sure way for a capitalist to ensure lasting profit.”[27]

The economy that dominated Europe between 500 and 1500 CE, the Commons Age, lacked the exclusive property rights that come with ownership. Under this order, misuse of resources (notably overconsumption) could bar you from future access. Over-exploitation of resources was reprimanded by the community. However, in the Privatization Age that was ushered in by the enclosures, the misuse of resources (notably overconsumption) is rewarded and seen as an expression of freedom. Under privatization regimes, landholders see it as their right and duty to maximize harvests and livestock production. Perversely, it has come to be regarded as a misuse of resources NOT to overexploit that which you own. Under the valorization of profit maximization that authorized the enclosing, not maximally exploiting the profit-potential of land was seen as a “waste” and thus inappropriate use of the land. One must “get their money’s worth.”

Increased output came to be prioritized over considerations of collective responsibility. “English landlords . . . created an unprecedented social space where all production was virtually completely freed from consideration of the immediate community’s needs.”[28]

Garrett Hardin's 1968 essay "Tragedy of the Commons" more accurately describes how groups behave under privatized, free-market, for-profit regimes than the commons he meant to critique. What Hardin describes—that groups will overexploit resources to which they have free access—could more accurately be framed as the "tragedy of the commodities." The scenario Hardin describes is precisely what would happen if a capitalized population was plopped down in a commons economy. But those who lived within commons systems were precisely *not* capitalized. Hardin, like many writers of the past two centuries, naturalizes selfish, competitive, greed. These antisocial behaviors were not "invented" by capitalism, but capitalism is the practice of making these adverse behaviors seem natural and inevitable and maybe even desirable. The privatization and financialization of land stoked great discontent. This discontent was eventually subdued by the "naturalization of exploitation."[29]

It is difficult to overstate the social impact of the enclosures. "The peasant economy was entirely destroyed by enclosure where it occurred."[30] The privatization of land made self-subsistence illegal—"a concerted and generalized assault against self-provisioning."[31] It became illegal to grow crops and graze cattle where it was once legal. Enclosures were undertaken to maximize profit, and part of that profit is forcing the peasantry to buy commodities (from food to clothes) as opposed to producing their own. A key (if not obvious) realization of the privatization era is that it was lucrative to force the population to buy things. Consumers are more lucrative than workers. If peasants are allowed to produce their own food, they don't have to pay to eat.

Economic historians sometimes write that enclosures worked; they increased agricultural output, thus reduced famine.[32] This is privatization propaganda. Famines occurred across Europe from the fourteenth to eighteenth centuries, not because commons subsistence methods were ineffective but because food was becoming monetized. When money was needed to obtain food, the threat of famine loomed, but for much of history money wasn't required to eat.[33] "As capitalism developed . . . Western Europe entered a period of endemic mass starvation, with the 17th century

seeing 61 famines."[34] As remains the case today, people starve due to lack of money, not an absence of food.

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Transitions to privatization faced obstinate and enduring resistance. Peasant classes across Europe fought off enclosures for centuries. Through a combination of legal action and organized resistance (famously in the form of physically "levelling" and "digging up" private property markers like hedges and fences), peasants had largely succeeded in thwarting the main thrust of aristocratic enclosing ambitions until the seventeenth century.

Much of the "damage" done by Levelers, Diggers, and similar rebels included tilling, seeding, and manuring the enclosed land—working it. This "underlines the fact that they expected to retain control of the land for some time."[35] Prior to the privatization regime, to work the land was to control it (or "hold" it). Three centuries of effective resistance was subdued in the seventeenth century through the increased usurpation of power by the aristocratic classes (ultimately leading to the English Civil Wars and the replacement of ordained sovereign power with aristocratic wealth power).

The Midland Revolt of 1607, which resulted in the deaths of forty resisting peasants at the hands of aristocratic mercenaries and civic executions, marks a tragic turning point that subtly altered the trajectory of power in England.[36] "The peasantry['s] . . . solidarity, which had long been based upon common economic interests, was rapidly vanishing, and . . . so was its capacity as a political force to be reckoned with. Although it was not apparent at the time the Midlands Revolt represented the final outburst by a peasantry already undermined by prior developments."[37]

The increasing enclosure of land in the Midlands led peasants to petition King James I to order a halt to the expansion of privatized space. The king responded by sending a commission to review the situation in the Midlands that advised against royal interference in the proceedings—a lack of regulation. As the enclosures faced increasingly organized resistance, demonstrations against the

aristocracy grew into the thousands. While many of the landed gentry reported being scared by the resisters, “The riots were remarkably free from violence against persons; all feelings were directed against the offending hedges, fences and ditches.”[38] What accusing gentry referred to as menacing weapons were actually just the agricultural tools used to work the land.[39] In the eyes of the gentry, shovels and picks had been transformed into weapons (though they were never deployed violently, unless one considers resistance to private property a violence).

Instead of listening to peasant claims, “The King issued a general proclamation ordering the suppression of enclosure riots by force of arms through the militia.”[40] The king’s tacit backing of the enclosures led to the slaughter of encamped protesters by the armed gentry force. “The gentry routed the peasants’ poorly armed forces, and in the process killed some forty or fifty of them and captured others, some of whom were hung, drawn and quartered, and their remains displayed in local market towns. The gentry’s defeat of the rebels at Newton signalled the failure of the rising. From this time on, there were no further large-scale demonstrations by the peasantry.”[41]

The aftermath of this peasant slaughter reveals much about long-term power dynamics in England. Some of the offending gentry were subsequently found by the Crown to have carried out illegal enclosures. While the government’s first response was to ignore the protestations of the peasants, allowing their way of life to be ended, the Crown retroactively acknowledged that the peasant cause was just. Ignoring peasant interests significantly hurt the cause of the Crown in the following English Civil Wars, during which the appeased aristocrats turned their violent desire for the growth of wealth from the peasants to the Crown.

Martin describes the lead-up to the Civil Wars: “Since peasant revolt had receded as a significant threat, absolutism now constituted the only obstacle to the further development of agrarian capitalism. The lines of conflict were now set. The landed class and its representatives in Parliament . . . saw agricultural improvement by enclosure and the establishment of individual property rights as the unequivocal means of advancement of their interests.[42]

The Enclosure Movement was not led by England's monarchs but rather the upper classes. These actors possessed near-sovereign power and held inconceivably more wealth and status than the peasants they were evicting. However, their power was not ordained as with the Crown, thus wealth (in land) served as a proxy for power. The regime of private property that dominates today is built upon the aspiration to attain and allot miniature sovereignty to aristocrats, or rather to break up the entire world into exchangeable (ownable and buyable) parcels of sovereignty. Gesell notes the sovereignty of private property: "He is lord of the land between his four stakes."[43] By the twentieth century, the aristocratic class's veneration of private property had become normalized and trickled down to some in the middle class who could now preside over the nano-sovereignty of a family home.

The story of the English Civil Wars is the triumph of aristocratic classes over the commons rights of peasants. In the struggles against enclosure, the Crown and the peasants were traditionally allied, both seeking to check the power of the upper class. In cases against enclosure brought to court before the Civil Wars, many were decided in favor of peasants over the enclosing aristocrats.[44]

The resistance to the growth of wealth by the Crown spurred the English Civil Wars. Similar upper-class bristling at constraints on wealth aggregation was behind the fall of the Roman Empire.[45] "The question of continued agrarian development was resolved by the English Civil War and the consequent destruction of the absolutist state apparatus. From then on, the state endorsed and approved enclosure."[46] After the Civil Wars and the entrenchment of aristocratic power in governance, courts no longer ruled against enclosures but mandated it![47] "Prevention of enclosure was now discredited as the program of a sect of religious . . . radicals."[48]

In the 1600s, as the anti-royalist Whiggish factions gained greater power, governing policy became increasingly geared toward facilitating the growth of individual fortunes, as opposed to stewarding the harmony of the social order. True, in the traditional social order 97 percent of the population were peasants of explicitly subaltern status. Peasant status, however, should not be conflated

with impoverishment. It was the enforcement of private property as a socially organizing tenet that impoverished the peasantry, not their lack of material possessions. In a world centered on private ownership as the source of prosperity, not to own anything is to be impoverished. In a world centered on stable interpersonal relationships, not owning anything has little impact on one's relative prosperity or impoverishment (as amply demonstrated in ethnographic accounts of non-Eurowestern groups[49]).

The Crown (the government) had been charged with looking after the interests of the peasant class, to serve as a check on the power of upper-class feudal lords. The remit of the Crown has never been to grow wealth and expand the economy (as is explicitly the case with many governments today). Rather, the obligation of the monarch was to ensure the preservation of the social order through time. Again, this social order was not equitable in terms of material possession, but if 97 percent of the population exists in a relatively similar social class, on a day-to-day basis, this nearly approximates an egalitarian society. A problem for monarchies (as with other forms of government) has always been how to check the power of the large wealth holders (the upper 2–3 percent of the population) from exploiting the peasant class and aspiring to more power.

While pro-monarchy sentiment is difficult to find today among any political faction, this sixteenth-century Florentine perspective offers an alternative: "It is better to be [born] under a prince than a republic. For a republic oppresses all its subjects, and shares out its benefits only among its citizens; whereas a prince is more impartial, and gives equally to one subject as to the other, so that everyone can hope to be beneficed and employed by him."[50]

Great British Bank Off

The emergence of the Bank of England was the culmination of a tumultuous century that included nearly fifty years of endemic peasant rebellions, followed by civil war. Upon the bank's creation, a

new regime of power emerged in England, which has been largely unchallenged since. While the Bank of England itself and Britain in general have faded from global eminence, the system of financial governance and economic rationality they ushered in still dominates the globe.

Following the Medici Bank in the fifteenth and Fugger Bank in the sixteenth century, the Bank of England (BOE) marks the next institutional leap in modern banking. By the sixteenth century and increasingly into the seventeenth, breakthroughs in economic engineering accelerated in Belgium, England, and Netherlands (as opposed to earlier innovation in the Italian sphere). Critical to this transition was that, in the sixteenth century (and through the nineteenth), the economies of northern Europe were considerably less regulated than the French and Italian. Perhaps more importantly, the authority of northern regulation was derived increasingly from a humanistic rather than religious-moral source. That is, the authority of laws came from the self-valorized reasoning capacity of humanity.

Since its founding in 1694 as a private for-profit company (and eventually nationalized in 1946), few institutions have had more influence over the shape of the global socioeconomic order than the Bank of England. The BOE normalized the indebtedness of governments to private financing (often to cover war-making costs).[51] Whereas the Medici went bankrupt lending to sovereigns, after the BOE banks would have the power to bankrupt sovereigns. The increasing indebtedness of governments to financing has led governance to reflect the values and perspectives of banking.

The role banks have come to play in governance is such that today it is difficult to discern where banking policies and legislative priorities begin and end. “On balance the large landowners became the state.”[52] Since the English Civil Wars and the BOE, the role of the state has been explicitly to provide the conditions for continued economic growth, as opposed to upholding social coherence. “The political and economic interests of the landed class had advanced beyond those that could be secured by the absolutist state.”[53]

In England, the convergence of banking and governance was the

result of aristocrats chipping away at the governing power of the Crown. The result of the English Civil Wars was to shift the job of governance from the monarchy to the wealthy. As a result of this shift of power, tax obligations shifted from rich to poor.[54] The rise of capitalism could be framed as the rise of governance by banks. Obviously, monarchs traditionally control significant wealth, but theoretically the monarch is beyond rich or poor. The whole point of having a monarch is that they need not be concerned with enriching themselves; their power does not derive from the vulgarities of material wealth. The prince's "people can never be oppressed by his debts."[55]

After the realignments of the Civil War, Restoration, and Glorious Revolution, those that ruled England sought policies that favored the growth of private wealth (their own wealth). The 1688 Glorious Revolution established the "subordination of the state to the interests of private property owners."[56] Economic historian Steve Pincus explicitly states that the victors of Glorious Revolution "imagined the possibility of infinite economic growth based on the complex interaction between the labor of producers and the desires of consumers," as opposed to the more finitely bound land-based economy pursued by the Crown.[57] Audaciously, this transition has been spun as emancipating the people of England from the absolutist tyranny of royals but was more accurately the emancipation of the upper class from royal restraints on the exploitation of the peasants.[58] With the Civil War, King Charles I was deposed by a power-hungry aristocracy. Charles I was killed for posing a threat to the capacity of the upper class to grow their wealth. The monarch's prerogatives were in conflict with the accelerating accumulation of private wealth.

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The BOE most visibly served as the government's creditor, "enjoy[ing] a special relationship with the British government, and the Whig Party in particular, because it was founded . . . to manage the national debt."[59] Crucial to the BOE is its defanging of government's

capacity to regulate the growth of wealth. While there have always been those seeking to accumulate wealth, the legal and moral means by which this pursuit could be conducted were traditionally tightly circumscribed. The transition to a capitalized society *is* the expansion of socially acceptable means for accumulating wealth.

With the rise of the BOE, the development of central banks, and eventually the establishment of the World Bank, it is difficult to discern banking from governance today. Increasingly governments (whether democracies, monarchies, or dictatorships) have simply become vessels for facilitating economic growth. Legislation, from military to education policies, implicitly prioritizes economic growth above any other civic consideration, such as health care, peace, or justice.

The emergence of the Industrial Revolution was a direct result of governance policies that were dictated by banking interests. Industrialization was prefigured by and dependent upon a ramping up of financializing capacity. “There were 119 English banks in 1784 . . . by 1798 the number of banks had grown to 312 [and] by 1813 there were 761 banks.”[60] The process by which the enclosures drove people off the land into the cities, ultimately supplying the labor for the factories, has been well rehearsed. Less so, however, is the role of financing in driving the Industrial Revolution. All those factories and steam engines were not built and paid for upfront with cash; in most cases they were paid for with borrowed money.

The new world ushered in by the Industrial Revolution could only have emerged in a society governed by those primarily concerned with accumulating wealth. Any possible social standard by which one examines the Industrial Revolution indicates sharp decreases in quality of life and traditional values. Apologists may say that, while industrialization was harsh, it was necessary to endure this difficult period to deliver today’s first-world conveniences. Such rhetoric ignores the fact that the same exploitative social and labor conditions people endured in Europe in the nineteenth century didn’t go away (such as suffocating pollution, child labor, and twelve-hour workdays), they just moved to the Global South (majority world). And further, many of those middle-class conveniences solve problems

that were induced by the changes in social organization brought about by industrialization.

Modern economic thinking and modern banking often congratulate themselves for their role in financing development, innovation, and new technologies. That is, banking tells itself that the marvels of modernity would not exist without its work of providing (interest-based) funding. Ultimately, this argument is extended to suggest there could not be art, food, or medicine without the capital provided by banks to support these endeavors.

To some extent this is true. There would not be Guggenheim Museums and the capitalized art markets within. Nor would there be the privatized pharmaceutical industry dedicated to prolonged consumption of drugs. Nor would there be the industrial agriculture that patents corn and tomato seeds, malnourishing a billion people.[61] Nor, of course, would there have been the maritime shipping infrastructure and technology that facilitated the slave trade. It's not that earlier polities didn't know that allowing commercial investment and commercial loans would spur development: it's that this development was not a priority. Making money for no reason was not a priority. With the ideology popularized by Benjamin Franklin and amplified under industrial production came a reverence for unnecessary, excessive, and useless money (money without use value).

The tumult and instability in Britain from 1600 to 1800 was largely the result of the transition from a society that did not prioritize economic growth to a society that had completely naturalized such growth. Today nearly the whole world has undergone or is undergoing this transition, enduring equal chaos and violence. The European wars of the early twentieth century were primarily a contest between polities over access to the space and time needed to grow wealth. The resolution of the wars and attendant economic institutions (e.g., the Marshall Plan and Bretton Woods) was a collusion among Eurowestern powers to build a global order that could accommodate the perpetual growth of Eurowestern wealth while codifying and legitimizing the extraction of wealth from beyond the Eurosphere.[62] After the wars, this process was streamlined,

leading to the eruption of economic growth between 1945 and 1975.

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Britain's dominance across economic, industrial, military, and colonial spheres has attracted much historical attention. Certainly, numerous complexities entangled Britain between 1600 and 1800—from riots to wars to financial crises—but the British Empire's unquestioned global dominance following this tumultuous period was most directly caused by banking. Specifically, England had a significant head start in pursuing unmitigated lending at interest and the convergence of lending, insurance, and investment activities. Today there are numerous institutions (government and corporate, public and private) that offer this trio of services, but for a few decades Britain had a monopoly on this financial confluence (more on this financial convergence appears in chapters 4 and 5).

England emerged as the first globalizing hegemon, allowing it to become the first polity truly capable of exercising the force to naturalize, to make its normal seem normal to the rest of the world (at gunpoint). To globalize is to naturalize one set of perspectives around the world. Historians often frame England's global dominance as an "ascension" or "rise"—a success story. However, the traditional narrative of British triumph in the race to colonial-capitalist supremacy can be inverted to portray Britain's global dominance as an abject failure. Britain failed to uphold traditional values, morals, and tenets of its faith(s), failed to sustain the conditions necessary for the reproduction of its commons class, and most tragically failed to generate enough wealth within its borders to satisfy its businessmen. Colonialism is a failure of self-sufficiency.

These cascading failures within England bled across the entire globe, disseminating peasant disempowerment everywhere. England failed so miserably that it screwed up the whole planet. No doubt, Britain reigned as the most powerful polity for a crucial century or two, but this dominance was not a product of skill or merit. Rather, it was a result of the exploitability of Britons, the weak alliance between Crown and peasantry, and the inability to put down the

upper classes.

Britain's failure to control its (upper-class) economy (i.e., the geographic unsustainability of its economy) helped spread the idea that societies are composed of individuals *competing* over scarce resources rather than as wholes who must work together and share resources to manifest stable and just social orders. Certainly, this general notion is not the exclusive invention of the English, as it developed out of the broader European Enlightenment, but England is most implicated in spreading and normalizing the notion globally.

Banking directly contributed to the export and normalization of this idea. While some suggest the suite of ideas promoting private property, individual rights, and liberalism descend from the Reformation, scientific revolution, the Enlightenment, and printing presses, these episodes are more derivative of the rising influence of finance and banking. That is, rather than the Enlightenment inspiring a shift to the liberal economic order, the ideas of the Enlightenment, including various articulations of individual rights and humanism were derived from the financial perspectives of the aristocratic class.

Hyper-liberalization

The first sustained multinational economic downturn of the postwar years occurred in the 1970s as a result of the political resistance of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), labor victories, and the general "completion" of efforts to rebuild Europe and Japan following the devastation of the wars. The response to the end of the postwar boom was a hyper-liberalization that sought to financialize every person, place, and thing on the planet. Reagan and Thatcher ushered this new era through the 1980s. Bill Clinton's trade agreements (NAFTA) and deregulation (the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act) accelerated this liberalization. And it has gone stratospheric with today's menagerie of digital currencies.

This story could be told beginning with the 1971 announcement by President Nixon that the United States would go off the gold

standard, devaluing the dollar (breaking the Bretton Woods system), and causing the wealth of foreigners holding US dollars to go down by about 20 percent.[63] This move has deeply entrenched the US geopolitical and economic dominance, as it made the US dollar the de facto gold standard. Pegging global currency values to the dollar (a conduit of capitalized growth) as opposed to gold (an inert substance), made the value of communist wealth plummet because it (at least the Soviet Union's wealth) was not stored in the same financialized growth instruments as the US dollar. Going off gold was crucial in the collapse of the Soviet Union.[64] The value of money for the rest of the world now rested in the hands of a US Federal Reserve increasingly run by neoliberalized and Milton Friedman-ized Wall Streeters.[65] "It is no exaggeration to insist that going off the gold standard was the economic equivalent of the death of God."[66] And God was replaced by the USA.[67]

In response to the 1970s financial downturn, the minority world (Global North) undertook a broad effort to massively indebt the majority world (Global South). This process has essentially been a completion of the English Enclosure Movement across the entire planet. Western-installed governments took out loans to westernize their countries, and as a condition of the loans they were forced to privatize their nation's resources. "Today the World Bank is facilitating a modern Enclosure Movement by promoting land registries in Third World and post-Soviet countries."[68] Like the English enclosures, the global version has met with staunch resistance, which has in turn been met with the murder of peasants and workers.

Much of this global enclosing has been overseen by postwar international institutions like the World Bank, which promotes itself as an international lending institution designed to extend credit to formerly colonized nations. This banal language conceals the ends pursued by the bank: to coordinate the transfer of money from states (and their taxpayers) to private, for-profit entities.[69] Such efforts to alienate people from the capacity for self-sufficiency are always met with resistance. Thus far, resistance to capitalization has only been successful on small, local, and temporary scales.

The peasant class in Bolivia, for example, won a struggle to prevent the privatization of water.[70] The World Bank required Bolivia to privatize its water supply as a condition for receiving state loans. This policy was enacted in 1999, with water rights being granted to the US multinational Bechtel Corporation and French Suez corporation. This led to massive public outrage at the extortionary price of water. Protesters successfully forced a re-nationalization of water, eventually enshrining water as human right in the 2009 Bolivian Constitution. While this is an inspiring victory, the trajectory of the past three hundred years suggests such victories are usually only temporary.

Too Big to Fail

There's a persistent misconception that banks are passive holders of money, a civic utility, providing a public service by storing and disbursing funds. Thus, for much of the past two centuries there have often been suggestions that banks need to be protected during times of crisis. The federal deposit insurance implemented with the Glass-Steagall Act of 1933 was such a protection. This sentiment underwrites the "too big to fail" rhetoric surrounding banks that entered the lexicon after the financial crisis of 2008.

The increasing entanglement of banking and governance has taken on new dimensions in the twenty-first century. Today when a politician refers to a bank as too big to fail, they are referring (whether they know it or not) to the related concerns of the money supply and interest rate. As liberal-Enlightenment Eurogovernance has demonstrated over the past three hundred years, persistent crises are not a significant concern. If states sought to eliminate crises caused by capitalized exchange, they would restrict capitalized exchange. There's no mystery to preventing economic crises. The mystery is how to prevent economic crises while continuing to accelerate the accumulation of wealth—a feat that seems impossible. When banks are said to be "too big to fail," what

this really means is “too big to fail if we wish to maintain current imbalances of power and wealth.”

The bluntest reason private commercial banks are “too big to fail” is because of their impact on the money supply. “Each individual bank is not a financial intermediary that passes on deposits, or reserves from the central bank in its lending, but instead creates the entire loan amount out of nothing.”[71] The question of how money is created is oddly not well understood and has been debated for centuries. Richard Werner offers a thorough analysis of the subject, concluding, as was commonly thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that money comes into existence when banks make loans. “Capitalist money . . . is bank debt.”[72]

Prior to the 1930s, the prevailing theory was that banks create money when they make loans. That is, every loan is a creation of money (from nothing), so for example, when you borrow $10,000 it creates money in the form of the interest you will pay. Werner’s diagnostic study of the life of a loan, from the application to the crediting of his account, agrees with this earlier theory—that money is created from nothing by bank loans.

Werner traces this theory to at least 1855, when it was “argued that individual banks create . . . money out of nothing, whenever they do what is called lending.”[73] Schumpeter agreed: “One could say, without committing a major sin, that the banker creates money.”[74] This monetary creation is crucial to problematizing economic growth because, “private banks create money and lend it with an interest. Repaying interests creates an imperative for the economy to grow.”[75]

However, through the twentieth century, the theory that banks are simple intermediaries gained prominence (i.e., banks don’t *make* money, they simply *redistribute* it). Banks may reallocate resources, as when some money is deposited and some lent, but the dominant theory holds that they are intermediaries, not agents of monetary policy. Accordingly, there is nothing particularly special about banks; they engage in market exchange, as do car companies. Banks mediate between the producer of money (the Federal Reserve) and customers (borrowers)—this thinking has evolved to de-emphasize the importance of banks.

Werner tracks how the dominant idea of *what banks do* evolved throughout the twentieth century. “It is sobering to realize that since the 1930s, economists have moved further and further away from the truth.”[76] He laments that today the credit-creation theory of lending (in which banks create money out of loans) is “belittled in the literature,” and today’s textbooks insist that “it has amply been proved that banks don’t create money out of nothing.”[77] Particularly interesting is the theoretical evolution of John Maynard Keynes. Like contemporaries in the early twentieth century, Keynes professed a belief that banks create money through loans, but as the century progressed, he moved toward the idea of banks as intermediaries. Indeed, the prevailing theory tracks right along Keynes’s shifting sentiments.

Why the shift in thinking? Does diminishing the perceived role of banks in the money supply allow banks to more easily avoid regulation? If people knew that private banks control the money supply, would they demand more oversight? “The sovereign prerogative to manufacture the currency of the nation has effectively been privatized and granted to the commercial banks.”[78] Paul Mattick adds, “That all money is produced today by banks and other financial institutions tells us that the banking system, essential to the functioning of a capitalist economy, has acquired a governmental character.”[79] When banks are in charge of providing money, they decide how to do so, “mainly, loans to buy real estate, stocks and bonds.”[80] This process is behind the 2008 subprime lending crisis as well as the associated debt crises that hit Greece and Iceland. In such cases, private banks have crippled governments.

Werner recognizes the potential dangers of transnational megabanks controlling the money supply and advocates for breaking up big banks and encouraging a wider system of regional banks, like what currently exists in Germany. Interestingly though, he also argues for limiting government power to serve as a check on private banks. Werner’s proposed eradication (or reduction) of central banks takes for granted the contemporary truth that central banks work in accord with the policy interests of large private banks. As Konings points out, “central banking does not represent a means of

exogenous regulation but is itself a form of banking."[81]

Many economists, even those highly critical of the current system, never seem to entertain the possibility of a government not aligned with banking interests. Banking and governance are so entwined that many economists assume it is impossible to have a government not dominated by banking. Rather than advocating for the detachment of government and banking, many popular solutions to systemic economic problems insist on taking more power away from government in hopes this will disempower the banks. The problem is perhaps that this close alliance between government and banks is not even seen as "corruption" but just the "normal" role of governance (to assist private accumulation of wealth). Indeed, if a government's primary concern is to facilitate the private accumulation of wealth, it is going to be a bad government (in terms of making people's lives better). Pardon my credulity, but theoretically couldn't there be a form of governance not beholden to banking?

In addition to rethinking what a bank loan is—the creation of money via the debt owed by the borrower—Werner offers a crucial reconsideration of bank deposits as well. When you deposit money in the bank, you are actually *loaning* the bank money. The bank uses your offering to maximize its profit from your money. Crucially, you are offering your loan to the bank at very low interest (often zero percent on checking accounts), whereas the bank is usually capable of eliciting at least a 3 percent return on the money you've lent it. That is, if you put $1,000 in a savings account, you might get thirty cents at the end of the year, whereas the bank will make probably at least $30. You can imagine the effect of this difference at the massive scales at which the large banks operate.

We all practice a kind of non-usurious lending when we make a bank deposit. This systemically normalized inequality is another means by which banks perpetuate the asymmetrical growth of wealth. We pay banks a fee (or give them a discount) to give our money to rich people.

Conversely, what we usually call loans (when the bank lends money to a borrower) could be reframed as the bank's purchase of

an asset. Every loan a bank makes is the acquisition of an asset. This asset could be called, “an individual’s wealth-generating capacity.” In the case of college loans, the bank is buying your future ability to accrue wealth. Banks may spin this as “investing in your future,” but they are buying you, buying your future wealth. As sociologist Lisa Adkins argues, loans make time (in that they build the future economic landscape). In the Ben Franklin adage “time is money,” both time and money have the same source—interest.[82]

It should go without saying that banking is so important because society’s primary means of resource distribution revolves around money. The normalization of banking followed the reintroduction of the widespread use of money in Europe in the second millennium of the Common Era. The use of money for the average person prior to 1200 CE was rather exceptional and unnecessary.[83] As money became normalized, banking became normalized, and eventually (by about the nineteenth century) perpetually growing wealth became normalized. By the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, banks became the primary means through which the money supply is controlled.

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One parameter over which central banks do exercise a level of autonomy is “the interest rate.” The central bank is critical in determining the interest rate used by commercial banks in their lending and disbursing activities. There have been debates over how to set the interest rate since the end of the nineteenth century. Equally, debates persist over what adjustments to the interest rate actually do. These unsettled questions affirm that “economists have a long record of theoretical and predictive failure.”[84]

Knut Wicksell was an early advocate of the idea that proper financial governance could be achieved by simply setting the correct interest rate. This position was novel for the late nineteenth century. For most at this time, the role of central banking was to serve as a lender of last resort. Today the lender of last resort function is largely perfunctory, and the central bank only makes headlines when it

lowers or raises the interest rate. “Whereas a nineteenth century observer might have had difficulty relating to the idea that a central bank could have functions other than last-resort lending, a late twentieth-century observer could similarly have been forgiven for assuming that central banking is essentially about inflation targeting.”[85]

Wicksell’s lineage of thought gained widespread acceptance throughout the twentieth century. The Wicksellian notion that a government can set an interest rate in order to bring about a desired economic response opens the door to conversations over the distinction between a “natural” and “real” interest rate. These terms are rather imperfect, but a “real” interest rate is understood as the rate that banks are charging/disbursing, whereas the “natural” rate is what the interest *should* be in order to attain the optimal level of spending, savings, prices, and wages. The job of the central bank, according to Wicksell is to bring the “real” rate as close as possible to the “natural” rate. Aside from this overt naturalization of interest, this framework presupposes an actually existing configuration of maximal economic growth.

Homicidal Banking

In most polities extortion is criminal (or at least ethically condemned). Over the past decades, however, lending practices toward rural Indian farmers could be described as a homicidal (and legal) form of extortion. Estimates suggest nearly 300,000 Indian farmers have died from debt since the 1990s.[86] While each of these deaths occurred under unique circumstances, a common thread is that the victim owed money to a lender.[87] Some may hesitate to attribute responsibility for these deaths to lending institutions, insisting that the 300,000 deaths among Indian farmers in the past two decades were suicides—the farmers killed themselves; no banks or agribusinesses pulled the trigger. Such dismissals alleviate the malevolent actors from culpability and fail to appreciate that the

predatory aspect of lending contributed to these deaths. The deceased were preyed upon, actively hunted, by financial institutions. Not only are victims depleted of all their assets, but they are also financially imprisoned—a life sentence. I offer here a brief overview of the general process of homicidal indebtedness in India.

Like with the English enclosures, newly "ownable" land was made available in India in the 1980s. This land offered the promise of micro-sovereignty if it could be maximally exploited to turn a profit. This profit-oriented agriculture, of course, means not growing subsistence crops but rather cash crops like cotton and pepper. Unlike the privatization of land in England where one had to be prosperous in order to acquire land, Indian peasants with little wealth could attain land through readily available loans.[88] Thus, many Indians who had never been landholders were able to acquire private property ("freedom" according to capitalist evangelists).

This has been a big transition for millions of Indians, and there have been some success stories. However, the system is not designed to facilitate the success of farmers. Critical to maximizing a farm's output (profit) is the price of crops on the market. Narayanamoorthy points out, "The main reason for farmers' suicides/distress is that the agriculture is no longer a profitable enterprise. Income from crop cultivation is not enough to meet the annual cultivation expenditure."[89] The larger global lending institutions know this. The price for cash crops like cotton cannot compete with the cheap subsidized US cotton. This leads to ever more intensive cultivating efforts—trying to do three or four harvests per year and being upsold on the latest synthetic fertilizers by agribusiness vendors who are notoriously deceptive about the effectiveness of their product.[90] Hybrid seeds can perform well for only one season, forcing farmers to repurchase every year.[91] Then, in trying to over-cultivate the land, the soil becomes depleted, forcing the farmer into a vicious cycle of buying more and more fertilizer and more and more seed, for which they need to take out more and more loans.[92] All the while, interest is compounding on all their loans. On top of this, the weather in Indian states like Karnataka has grown increasingly unpredictable over the past three decades, making

cultivation even more difficult.[93]

After ten years of this, even if one is a good farmer and manages to maximize the land's output, it becomes mathematically challenging to get ahead of loan payments (considering the interest). At this point, the lending institution can foreclose on the land, meaning they now own it. If the farmer is "lucky" they may be allowed to continue laboring on the land, with any profits generated seized by their lenders, essentially being forced into unpaid labor.[94] More likely though, the lender will sell the land, at a greater profit, to someone else and repeat the whole process again over the next ten to twenty years. It makes no difference to the bank if one farmer is able to pay back their loans. In fact, they may prefer the debt-to-foreclosure cycle.

If you are still skeptical that these farmer deaths are homicides perpetrated by the combined forces of banking and agribusiness, a majority of the deceased (53 percent) have died by consuming the very pesticides and insecticides they were coerced into buying.[95] "Since the mid-1990s, more than 290,000 Indian farmers have committed suicide—often by drinking pesticides as both a symbolic act of political protest against agrobusiness and an expedient means to end life."[96] Ironically, suicide is a criminal offense in India.[97] However, murder by debt is not. Hudson offers the simple and powerful insight that "debts which can't be paid, won't be. The great political question is, how won't they be paid?"[98] For many Indian farmers, the answer appears to be death.

This is an incredibly lucrative system for lenders and agribusiness companies, and it is virtually risk-free for the financial institutions. Recalling chapter 2, it is precisely this sort of riskless gain that has traditionally been found sinful in Abrahamic religions. Riskless gain has been deemed immoral across several traditions because it creates situations where you have no stakes in the success or failure of your neighbor. In reciprocal gifting economies there are systemic incentives for you to wish success for your neighbor (or exchange partner)—if they fail in their endeavors, it reduces your gain.[99]

Some may object that lenders don't make farmers kill themselves. Some Indian politicians have called the dead cowards for "taking the

easy way out." The farmers could have rolled up their sleeves and worked harder. If this is true, it means that Indians (by percentage) are exceptionally bad at farming. Over 50 percent of Indian farmers are in debt and nearly 18 percent have been killed by this debt.[100]

Kaushal has argued that traditional community social structures for support and organized resistance are no longer in place, having deteriorated through years of neoliberal privatization.[101] Indian farmers are isolated in their despair, whereas hard times in the past would have been met with community support. A common theme in the assessment of these deaths is isolation and individualism.

Mohanty has examined agrarian deaths in India via Emile Durkheim's typology of suicide.[102] Durkheim's "fatalistic" category seems appropriate, as it applies to "persons with futures pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline."[103] One wonders when the farmer suicide crisis in India will no longer be considered a crisis but rather the normal operating of capital. "There is a logic that coaxes many into willfully overlooking . . . what becomes normalized as unfortunate 'costs' of progress and development. Even many of those who recognize the production of death under neoliberal reforms embrace such a logic."[104]

Panini suggests, "The suicides are also symptoms of the pathology of globalisation . . . [and] as the peasant became a farmer [landholder], he lost the tradition of resilience and pragmatism that had been the hallmark of his survival strategy. Agribusiness had rendered him dependent on the technical experts and scientists and various commercial interests that dominate his life today."[105]

As such indictments allude, the genesis of this agrarian nightmare can be found in the Indian government's privatization and liberalization policies throughout the 1980s and 1990s. If you were worried the negative repercussions of these policies might be second-guessed or reformed, "ministers of the government have been repeatedly assuring investors that economic liberalization in India is irreversible."[106]

Indian peasant movements have argued "that farmer suicides are in part a product of the Green Revolution and its drive for high-input agricultural modernization."[107] While agribusinesses have

congratulated themselves on innovative chemicals that have propelled the surge in crop production, much like the Industrial Revolution, this second (or third) agricultural revolution of the twentieth century was driven much more by economic innovation than technological innovation. Despite (or because of) $40 billion per year being spent on pesticides, about 40 percent of crops are destroyed every year by insects and other pathogens.[108]

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Several solutions have been proposed to this ongoing tragedy. One popular line of rhetoric is that rural farmers and peasants (globally, not just in India) are "underbanked"— they lack access to formal financial institutions and are consequently forced to rely on loan sharks or payday lenders. That is, rural communities do not have enough access to formal exploitation. The "underbanked" argument derives from the fact that, indeed, some of the most brutal interest rates agrarian farmers endure come from local unregulated lenders (who may charge rates of 20 percent or more). However, this is slightly misleading. Most of the loans for land purchases are offered through more formal and ostensibly well-regulated banking institutions. The local extortionary lending becomes more prominent on secondary loans for fertilizers, seed, and life expenses like groceries, weddings, or funerals.[109] The larger formal institutions do not frequently offer these smaller loans. Those that suggest rural farmers are underbanked often promote various systems of microlending to theoretically protect farmers from turning to local loan sharks. However, the solution to extortion isn't light extortion.

On this matter, Iyer writes, "*Naturally* the farmers are forced to resort to loan sharks."[110] This presumption of the *naturalness* of exploitation is common. The naturalization of exploitative economic growth occurs every day in nearly every newspaper. Clearly though, there is nothing natural about the existence of loan sharks. Nor is there anything natural about farmers being forced to take money from loan sharks to buy synthetic chemicals to grow cotton to ship across the world. Social scientists have worked tirelessly to rebuke

such notions of “natural,” but their efforts have had little to no impact on the general public.[111]

Another questionable response to farmer deaths has been increased neoliberal paternalism. Iyer, for example, calls for greater corporate social responsibility (CSR) to solve the problem.[112] With bold naivety, Iyer suggests corporations should start “acting like a gentle father” toward the peasant class.[113] Iyer also proposes deregulation, expressing dissatisfaction (correctly) that the Indian government is not doing enough to help distraught farmers. Yet, their proposed solution is not for government to do more but instead for business to be more responsible. Such instinctive responses are quite normal in the wake of Reagan-Thatcher neoliberalism.[114] If one is outraged that the Indian government isn’t helping Indian farmers, why not advocate for them to start helping? Instead, Iyer concludes, “The government, which is traditionally supposed to help them in hard times like this, has abandoned all support to them. . . . As we have already seen, the corporations have no contractual responsibilities. . . . But would it be wrong to appeal to the paternalistic benevolence of these corporations who seem to be the only ones in a position to do something to help the farmers?”[115]

It may be a sad truth that most global governments have been dismantled to an extent that the help they can offer is insufficient, but, going back to the Bank of England, government ineptitude is caused by giving infrastructural power to “paternalistically benevolent corporations.”

Rao and Gopalappa also argue against government help, saying that “field experience indicates that safety nets are probably the weakest policy component. . . . Safety nets belong to the category of populist measures marked by corruption, leakages and limited research.” They promote policies that encourage high-risk agricultural undertakings, such as cotton and say, “weaknesses in growth-promoting services punish the enterprising among farmers.”[116]

In contrast to these growth-centered solutions to farmer deaths, Narayanamoorthy, discussing the effectiveness of potential government relief, offers the only solution that would indicate that

farmers' lives are worth more than bank profits: "instead of rescheduling loans . . . the government should think of waiving loans up to a certain limit or for all marginal and small farmers."[117]

The globally dominant system of social organization today prioritizes the growth of wealth (by entities that are already incredibly wealthy) over the lives of Indian farmers. If economic growth was not prioritized over these lives, the practices that lead to their deaths would be restricted or prohibited. If human lives were valorized over the growth of wealth, homicidal banking would be illegal. Would we rather ruin the lives of billions of people or curtail banks' ability to grow their wealth exponentially?

Exploiting Embarrassment

Banks are enclosing features of our sociopolitical landscape, permitting and restricting our activities (particularly our means of subsistence). Given this, perhaps a definition of the bank could be *an institution that perpetuates unequal access (to wealth)*, complementing the previous chapter's definition of interest as the *amplification of inequality*. Silvio Gesell seems amenable to this definition, writing that "our whole economic system . . . is founded upon exploitation of our neighbour's embarrassment."[118]

Inequality is critical to the existence of banks, particularly the exploitation of inequitable access to resources. Greater levels of inequality are lucrative for banks. Indeed, over the last six hundred years, the banking industry has worked to both exacerbate inequality and seek out new inequalities. The unprecedented accumulation of wealth over the past three hundred years would not have been possible without the continuous creation of new exploitable groups.

Authors like Charles Geisst repeatedly refer to Eurowestern banking as "sophisticated," but perhaps a better adjective for Western banking would be "unethical." What distinguishes Western modes of economic activity far more than their complexity or sophistication is that they explicitly disavow ethics and morality. The

“sophistication” is secondary and, as has been the case from the Medici to today, follows from proactive efforts to evade contemporary moral and legal standards. That is, Western banking is forced to be “sophisticated,” because otherwise it would be illegal.

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8
Konings, *Capital and Time*, 17.
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Azpilcueta, *On Exchange*, 56.
10 Violation of law is, by definition, injustice, but can there be legal injustice? This seems to be the contemporary status quo of large financial outfits.
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12 De Roover, “Scholastics,” 269.

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David McNally, *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 38
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16 Caroline Gerschlager, *Expanding the Economic Concept of Exchange: Deception, Self-Deception and Illusions* (New York: Springer, 2001).
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34 Sullivan and Hickel, “Capitalism and Extreme Poverty,” 7.
35 McDonagh, “Disobedient,” 265.
36 Among the executed was the iconic “Captain Pouch” (John Reynolds), who urged nonviolent resistance and offered protective magic from the contents of his pouch (a moldy piece of cheese).
37 Martin, *Feudalism*, 214.
38
Martin, *Feudalism*, 175.
39 McDonagh, “Disobedient.”
40 Martin, *Peasant*, 166 (the definition of “riot” at the time was three or more people colluding).
41 Martin, *Feudalism*, 167.
42
Martin, *Feudalism*, 215.
43 Gesell, *Natural*, 52.

44 Tawney, *Religion*.
45 Hudson, *And Forgive Them*.
46
Martin, *Feudalism*, 215.
47 All the resistance and revolts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were “clearing the way for the parliamentary enclosures of the eighteenth century” (Martin, *Feudalism*, 215). “Although large-scale land dispossession predated capitalism, new features emerged in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries . . . amongst others, a more methodical reliance on legal frameworks that legitimized dispossession” (Alvaro Sevilla-Buitrago, “Capitalist Formations of Enclosure: Space and the Extinction of the Commons,” *Antipode* 47, no. 4 [2015]: 1006).
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Chapter Four: A Good Neighbor (Insurance)

“Like a good neighbor, State Farm is there.” This iconic advertising slogan of US insurance company State Farm suggests that through the insurance they provide, the company is like a helpful neighbor that comes to your aid in times of distress, helps you get back on your feet, is concerned for your well-being. This brilliant piece of marketing captures nicely the reliable and responsible veneer of the insurance industry today. Prior to the 1800s, however, buying insurance was seen as an irresponsible form of gambling for unethical degenerates.

By reviewing an abbreviated history of insurance over the past few centuries, this chapter highlights these shifting sensibilities. In examining how insurance facilitates the violence of perpetually accelerating asymmetrical economic growth, I discuss the invention of risk, the popularization of insurance through maritime trade, the *Zong* massacre, the development of probability, and the role of insurance in health care and climate change.

Of the insurance, banking, and securities sectors, insurance is the most overlooked in terms of perpetuating exploitative economic relations. The industry has been rebranded over the past two centuries such that many consider insurance to be an essential service that provides security and peace of mind. The aim of this chapter is to challenge this perception and illustrate that the way insurance constructs and values the future renders millions precarious by profitizing and individualizing responsibility. The mechanisms of insurance are crucial to the inequitable accumulation and aggregation of wealth. That insurance’s public perception is perhaps the most congenial in the financial world indicates that it is

has been deeply normalized. Without the architecture of insurance undergirding modern financial practices, the systemic growth of wealth would not be tenable. Insurance tells us how much the future is worth.

Along with State Farm's indelible motto, the insurance industry (in the US) is notable for several iconic advertising campaigns and mascots. Geico has its Gecko and its erudite caveman. Aflac has its squawking duck. Allstate has its Mayhem character. Progressive has its chipper salesperson, Flo. All these characters, like those at Disneyland, serve to anesthetize the business dealings of these companies. Insurance is a family-friendly face, claiming to protect us against the precarity of a ruthlessly competitive society. Insurance is the amiable clown that softens the daggers of extractive financialization. Insurance and investing are the good cop / bad cop of financial persecution. The Geico Gecko isn't out to hurt you, he only wants you to know that "15 minutes could save you 15 percent or more on car insurance."

Earning over $6 trillion annually, insurance is the largest sector of the global economy by revenues. If it was a country, its GDP would make it the third largest.[1] But this fact is somewhat misleading. It's not quite right to refer to insurance as just another sector of the economy (like the automotive or tech sectors). Rather, through its production of future value, insurance *is* the canvas on which the economy is performed. "'Insurance is the mortar between the bricks of commerce.'"[2]

• • •

This chapter engages critically with the work of François Ewald, whose analysis of insurance is highly perceptive in assessing the character, history, and role of insurance. Yet it derives from these accurate assessments rather troubling conclusions. Ewald eloquently describes a primary argument of this chapter: "The development of insurance is accompanied by a transformation of social morals, a transformation of an individual's relation to himself or herself, to his or her future, and to society."[3]

Ewald sees this transformation as positive, but I'm not convinced. For Ewald insurance "constitutes a mode of association which allows its participants to agree on the rule of justice. . . . Insurance makes it possible to envisage a solution to the problem of poverty and working-class insecurity. Thanks to insurance, by a minimal contribution which can be afforded, the worker can safeguard against the ills that continually threaten."[4]

Rather than offering "a solution to the problem of poverty and working-class insecurity," I argue that by commodifying security, risk, and vulnerability, insurance induces poverty and working-class insecurity. Insurance is the prerequisite for precarity. While Ewald suggests "insurance . . . liberates man from fear," historically, insurance is the source of capitalized fear.[5] That is, insurance was pointedly developed to fabricate risk and the fear of uncertainty. "The very possibility of insurance . . . created 'a new basis for anxiety.'"[6]

Ewald himself seems contradictory on this point: "For insurance to exist, a new need for security had to appear. Insurance is the offspring of capital. This new form of security was not needed in a feudal economy, in which property was tied to the land, and the individual was enclosed within the bonds of family and religion, or within corporate solidarity."[7]

He sees insurance as a positive response or auxiliary to capitalism. He admits capitalism is fearsome but is grateful insurance emerged as a market response to allay capital's ferocity. However, insurance is not an independent ameliorating adjunct to capitalism. It does not prevent or impede the dangers of capitalism; it *is* capitalism. In Ewald's own framing, insurance appears more like an extortionary mafia racket that demands payment for "protection." Protection from what? From itself. That is, if you don't make your monthly insurance payment, capitalism can't be held responsible if you were to suffer an "accident" or surprise misfortune. There is value in keeping people anxious and afraid.

Fear of uncertainty and fear of loss are not unique to capitalized peoples, but efforts to monetize this fear and uncertainty through insurance represent a shift in EuroChristian ethical practices. While insurance may have "began as a mutually beneficial system of

finance," the commodification of this mutuality is a peculiar modern mutation.[8] Establishing mutually beneficial relationships is at the heart of many forms of social organization outside the European sphere.[9] What distinguishes modern insurance from the mutuality of the Trobriand Island gift exchange system, for example, is that it transforms "sharing" ("shared interest" or "shares") into a commodity. This makes "sharing" appear scarce and precious in the capitalized world; makes sharing appear to have a cost, not at all a means of building wealth.

As Leonard points out "Trade is unlikely to *grow* . . . in the absence of insurance."[10] Very true, and this book is critical of that growth. A lack of insurance would by no means eliminate trade and exchange, but it would reduce the large-scale investments of real estate developers and fossil fuel companies that propel the accelerating asymmetrical expansion of the economy. More than providing neighborly help, the primary reason for insurance is to serve as a vessel for the growth of wealth. "When insurance appeared . . . it was not founded on a sense of solidarity, but rather in the spirit of financial gain."[11]

Insurance brought together the new concepts of risk and probability to ensure that wealth accumulates. Not having insurance is deemed irresponsible because it jeopardizes the security of economic growth; makes gain less certain. Insurance backs up the world's wealth. Uninsured people or resources diminish aggregate global wealth. When they die or are harmed, their value is lost, whereas the loss of *insured* people or resources is backed up. The death of someone with life insurance often contributes to economic growth.[12] Beneath the surface rhetoric about irresponsibility, the uninsured are portrayed as a burden on society because *it costs more to hurt them*. The suffering of the uninsured doesn't make anyone any money. Insured people, however, can be freely and sometimes lucratively abused.

Inventing Risk

As discussed in chapter 3, insurance played a critical role in overcoming legal and ecclesiastic prohibitions on interest—illegal, usurious loans were semantically disguised as insurance on the *future* value of wealth. Thus, it is again useful to turn to the Medici Bank to interrogate the development of insurance. Critical to this history is the concept of risk—how it was invented, manipulated, and deployed to alter the moral landscape of finance. While concepts such as danger, hazard, and vulnerability appear rather timeless, risk (as it has been conceived since the fifteenth century) is rather distinct—a quantifiable and calculable valuation of contingency.

The development and sale of bills of exchange strategically introduced uncertainty into the outcome of financial transactions. Remember, "it was usury to make a certain profit on a loan, no matter whether the profit was great or small."[13] The caveat that crafty Early Modern bankers and merchants exploited to sidestep this ban was that a transaction was not usurious if it entailed *uncertain* gain. Risk *is* this uncertain gain. At this point, interest and insurance were forged. This "was how [insurance] came into being as an effect of the Church's prohibition on interest, since interest no longer came under the ban when it was made the remuneration of a risk."[14] The risk (potential for loss) is not altogether fabricated. Some insurers do fail, as in the wake of catastrophes like Hurricane Katrina or miscalculations like the 2008 financial collapse. However, the profitability of surviving enterprises goes up during widespread failures.[15] Failure or success for any specific company is ultimately secondary to providing a platform for perpetual (undeterrable) accumulation.

The Medicis and their ilk promoted the uncertainty of their financial instruments by rebranding interest on a loan as insurance on the future value of wealth. "The usury prohibition therefore could be evaded by using contracts that turned this certain gain into something uncertain."[16] To legally charge interest, Early Modern banking reframed the future as intrinsically full of risk and uncertainty. That is, in order to legally perform capitalism, the future must be volatile. Building a risk society, wherein every activity has a quantifiable risk, from crossing the street to skydiving, germinated a

novel temporality of vulnerability—vulnerability as a future condition to be secured against.

Insurance shifts vulnerability to the future as a probability of incurring harm. Ewa Ziarek, however, argues that vulnerability is traditionally a condition of the present, not the future.[17] It is the shared indispensable baseline of existence—as Arendt suggests, "the price of mundane freedom." If something does not possess the ability to hurt, is not vulnerable, then it is not alive. Thus, the suppression of vulnerability points toward lifelessness and unfreedom.[18]

As discussed in chapter 2, one justification for usury in the modernizing period was the preference for wealth in the present over the future. As mentioned, many have challenged such a universal time preference. The appearance of a preference for present wealth can be traced to the construction of uncertain futures. The purported reason for this present time preference is the uncertainty of the future. Insurance institutionalized the uncertainty of the future. Discussing a present time preference, Böhm-Bawerk cautions against confusing interest ("the fruit of money") with what should "properly be called the price of insurance," but this "confusion" seems deliberately propagated by fifteenth-century bankers.[19] Interest was legalized precisely because it was intentionally conflated with insurance by the Medicis. Interest was transformed into a risk to make it legal.[20]

Ewald draws this connection between insurance and the birth of risk quite explicitly: "Insurance can be defined as the technology of risk. In fact the term 'risk' which one finds being used nowadays apropos of everything has no precise meaning other than as a category of this technology. Risk is a neologism of insurance . . . The whole theory of insurance rests on the fundamental notion of risk."[21] The phrase "taking risks" derives from the "calculus of economic and financial affairs."[22] Thus, when we speak of taking risks in love or sports, these are metaphors from finance.

Again, Ewald precisely diagnoses the historical relationship between insurance and risk, noting that the insurer "'produces risks', he makes risks appear where each person had hitherto felt obliged

to submit resignedly to the blows of fortune. . . . By objectivizing certain events as risks, insurance can invert their meanings: it can make what was previously an obstacle into a possibility."[23] It is the "possibility" that is commodifiable. "The concept of risk is generated by a perception that 'threat' and 'vulnerability' are integral components of modernity itself."[24]

Writing from the School of Salamanca in the sixteenth century, theologian Martín de Azpilcueta reveals the close connotation of interest with insurance. "There is no student with three years of canon study who doubts that it is usury to lend money to another under the obligation of insuring it with him."[25] Such sentiments reveal that theologians were not necessarily fooled by efforts to hide interest as insurance but lacked the legal mechanisms for prosecuting the practice. Azpilcueta and his colleagues at the School of Salamanca knew that "whoever insures a piece of merchandise that is to go through dangerous places is a usurer if he takes something for it."[26] Whether one adheres to Azpilcueta's delineation of usurious practices, his writing certainly indicates the line (if there is one) between insurance and interest is rather fuzzy.

"Take away the essential element of risk, and the legal aleatory agreement immediately collapsed into an illegal usurious one. . . . Risk was the pivot around which new ideas about the fertility of money turned, and as such was accepted by some early modern canonists as a title to both profit and property, and later to interest."[27] Risk neutralizes usury.

Addobbati teleologically interprets Early Modern conversations over the legality of insurance: "Discussions about the lawfulness of the contract were definitively superseded by a utilitarian appreciation of the benefits which insurance brought to the world of commerce, and, indirectly, to society."[28] Such language directly equates benefits to the world of commerce with benefits to society in general. Likewise, Leonard writes, "insurance was essential to trade, and trade was critical to the common good."[29] Questionable. Interest and insurance may indeed be beneficial to world commerce (if beneficial means lucrative), but the well-being of society may not always coincide with the world of commerce.

Maritime Conglomerates

“The basic marine insurance structure has been in use ‘time out of mind.’”[30] Many Greek and Roman shipping expeditions offered forms of reimbursement for goods lost during maritime mishaps. However, these classical forms of insurance bear little resemblance to today’s, as they were not premised on the pooling of risk.[31] “Inarguably, it was during the commercial revolution of the late middle ages that conventional premium insurance—characterized by the advanced payment of a fee to a third party who, in exchange, assumes a portion of a foreseeable risk, under a contract unconnected to any advance capital—was finally developed as a tool to transfer risk.”[32]

Lending for purposes of maritime trading is one of the oldest methods of skirting interest bans. The *cambium nauticum* was a legal concept exempting maritime trading loans from usury bans in the Early Modern period. “Many, in seeing canon law forbade usuries in general but did not prohibit nautical ones, took to lending by assuming the risk whether there was danger or not and whether what was lent went through sea or land.”[33] It is probably not a coincidence that Piccinno places the first example of an insurance loan contract at 1287 CE, shortly after Pope Gregory IX’s *Naviganti* decree forbidding maritime interest.

The history of insurance is inextricably entwined with seafaring, whether for trade, exploration, or warfare (and the three are difficult to disentangle).[34] The oldest and most prominent insurance outfits, such as Lloyds of London, grew out of maritime trade. This entanglement between shipping and insurance is usually ascribed to the dangers posed by the sea. From pirates to inclement weather, the sea can be an inhospitable terrain.[35] Halpérin points to the sea’s resistance to regulation, “The sea alone was able to elude rigid feudal armature. The cornerstone of the feudal world was essentially the land; the sea escapes social and political hierarchies; it is not subject to any governmental authority whatsoever.”[36]

In addition to the danger and the lack of regulation, insurance developed through seafaring because that’s where the money was

circulating. Where there is money, there is insurance. This is not a cause-and-effect relationship where insurance simply follows money. Rather, it is symbiotic relationship; financing and insurance are co-constitutive. The global buying and selling of commodities is inalienable from the buying and selling of risk. Commodities can't get from Britain to India without investment in both the profit and the risk—"the ability to share and transfer risk became a key backstop of merchant activity, capital exploitation, and the promotion of economic growth and wealth."[37]

The pooling of risk in European trading, beginning in the Italian city-states (Genoa, Venice, Florence) is the key development that eventually led to the large-scale insurance companies of today, wherein "the law of large numbers" allows for an *almost* riskless purchase of risk. Much maritime insurance before the eighteenth century could be bought from individual underwriters or informal underwriting groups with surplus wealth.[38] Prior to the 1700s there were not really insurance "companies" but rather disaggregated underwriters.[39] In many cases, a group of wealthy merchants would come together to insure a voyage—share the risk in exchange for the profit. As terms like "sharing risk" hint, risk is frequently synonymous with "profit sharing." One can buy a share of risk (insurance) or a share of profit (stocks).

In the eighteenth century, both merchant-traders and underwriters vocally opposed the emergence of insurance companies.[40] They were resisted in Amsterdam until nearly the nineteenth century. It was thought that insurance conglomerates would come to control the market for premiums. Of course, this fear was realized, but more saliently the effect of incorporated insurance outfits was to standardize the sector and help change the practice's public image. Advocates for incorporating the first insurance companies pitched them as a public good—providing a more well-regulated market.[41] However, after the appearance of the first companies in 1720, pro-insurance rhetoric centered on private gains. Insurance products were basically perceived as gambles until life insurance companies adopted the language of science and responsibility. Through public relations sleight of hand, what was once irresponsible gambling

became prudent foresight.

The semantic hoops developed to avoid the appearance of lending at interest in marine insurance are notable. The “ambiguous nature of contracts . . . were intended . . . to circumvent usury regulations.”[42] Through the sixteenth century, contracts were drawn in which a merchant would pay an underwriter to agree to buy their wares if they were lost (or damaged). That is, underwriters were agreeing to buy non-existent (lost) goods—a fantastical pretense that should have been deemed heretical. “The main challenge facing medieval marine risk-transfer instruments was their usurious nature, since the . . . risk premium in part comprised interest charges . . . numerous attempts to circumvent [interest bans] by camouflaging the premium met with dubious success.”[43]

As discussed further in chapter 5, the development of modern insurance alongside maritime shipping from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries is also inseparable from the rise of joint-stock companies like the East India trading companies of Britain and Holland. That is, the stock market (as we know it) would not have emerged without the market for insurance. Much as the distinction between interest and insurance is fuzzy, so too is the distinction (if there is one) between buying insurance and buying shares of stock. In situations where multiple unrelated underwriters insured fragmented pieces of a seafaring voyage, the relationship was very much like dividing a company’s profits into multiple shares.

It has been argued that the rise and normalization of insurance technology was caused by a growing demand for money since the Crusades. “An alternative way to meet the growing demand for money driven by expanding trade, particularly long-distance trade, was to increase the velocity of the circulation of money through the introduction of new credit instruments.”[44] This argument could be extended to characterize the rise of capitalized relations as simply an increased demand for money. “Once you begin to measure wealth in cash, enough doesn’t exist. Whatever the sum, it could always be larger. Accountancy is familiar with the categories of ‘more’ and ‘less’ but doesn’t know that of ‘enough.’”[45]

There is no ceiling on the demand for money: “[The Church’s] total

ban of lending at interest . . . was justified by a theological argument based on fraternity and natural moral law. As economic life began to evolve more rapidly . . . the commercial revolution advanced an increasing demand for money that could not be fully met by circulation of bullion-based currency. Thus, recourse to loans with interest grew in spite of the canon-law ban, and was accompanied by an increased pressure to abolish or skirt usury restrictions."[46]

Massacre Insurance

Few events more vividly illustrate the depravity of exploitative profit maximization than the *Zong* massacre of 1781 in which 132 captive Africans were drowned on a transatlantic slave ship to recoup insurance money on lost "cargo." This event illustrates the lengths to which dehumanization and violence are pursued in the name of wealth maximization. In the *Zong* massacre the depravity of the slave trade converged with the banality of insurance. The sentiments recorded in the court proceedings surrounding the event reveal the twisted logic that defenders of economic growth must promote to justify their ideology.

James Walvin writes of Lord Mansfield, the presiding judge for the *Zong* hearings: "Though he 'doubted the validity of theoretical justifications of slavery' and attempted 'to reduce instances of individual cruelty to slaves', above all he fully accepted the commercial importance of the slave trade to Britain. He also realised that to declare slavery in England illegal would have untold economic ramifications for Britain's slave-based commerce."[47] For Mansfield it is more important to grow profits than prevent cruelty. This is the naturalized logic of capitalization—society is organized around the growth of wealth, not the prevention of cruelty.

Registered out of Liverpool, the *Zong* was in the process of completing the triangular trade of evil from England to Africa to the Caribbean.[48] Under the command of the sickly Captain Collingwood, the *Zong* did some wrong navigating leaving it out to sea for weeks

longer than expected. This misstep meant they would not have enough fresh water on board to make landfall comfortably.

A great deal remains unclear about the precise sequence of events aboard the *Zong*, but ultimately Captain Collingwood ordered a serialized execution of 132 captive Africans by throwing them overboard. Sadistically, the executions took place in three waves. Upon landfall in Jamaica, little was made of the episode in the ship's logs. All that is recorded is the arrival in port of the *Zong* with 208 captives in relatively good condition.

The entire episode (like many similar ones then and now) may have gone completely unremarked upon if the ship owners hadn't taken the insurers to court for their unwillingness to pay out for the lost "cargo" (the 132 murdered Africans).[49] In the initial trial over the insurance claim, little public attention was given, and the case was decided on behalf of the ship's owners: the insurance company owed compensation for the dead "cargo." It wasn't until crusading abolitionist Granville Sharp got wind of the story that it attracted public notoriety.

The death of African captives during transport at sea was covered by insurance in some circumstances. "The shipowners were pursuing their claim under well-established protocols of maritime insurance, which accepted that enslaved Africans on board the Atlantic ships were insured as cargo."[50] In cases of African deaths owing to revolt or rebellion, insurers were obliged to pay out. However, if Africans died of "natural" causes (including suicide), the insurer was generally not obliged to pay. What was unclear at the time of the *Zong* massacre was the legal status of claims for the deaths of captives who were murdered *not* in relation to revolt or rebellion.

Outrage became widespread as the story gained attention and the insurance company petitioned for a retrial. The hearing to decide whether there could be a retrial was highly scrutinized. Technically, this proceeding pertained only to the matter of the insurance payout. The hearing was not meant to adjudicate upon the legality of murdering African captives (this would remain legal) but was concerned solely with "What was the legal position if the crew

deliberately killed Africans for reasons other than suppressing their uprising? It seems the question had never been asked before."[51] In their defense, the *Zong* legal team consistently used the words "necessity" and "necessary" to describe the killing of the 132 Africans (*it was necessary to kill 132 Africans to reach Jamaica successfully*).

The court and the public seem not to have been swayed by this characterization. Despite the arguments of the *Zong's* legal team, "no amount of forensic analysis of insurance policies could possibly justify such a mass killing."[52] The hearing ended with Lord Mansfield granting the petition for a retrial, siding against the murderers. The case, however, never went to retrial. The ship's owners didn't press the matter further, perhaps fearing more scandal.

After the trial, "Lord Mansfield had been obliged to wrestle with the peculiarities and confusions created by slavery."[53] One must ask though, what is so confusing? "Confusion" here is a pretext for immorality. "Confusion" is a euphemism for cowardice. "Confusion" is an effort to manufacture willful naivety. Lord Mansfield was able to construct a complex legal architecture of willful naivety for himself (as did other well-educated agents in positions of power), which allowed them to paralyze their morality.

The *Zong* massacre was so egregious that it shocked mainstream English sensibilities, galvanizing support for the abolition of slavery. The instinctive human response to this inhumanity testifies to how disgusting economic growth is when its most fundamental truth is laid bare. When faced with the bald horrors of this pursuit, the public is usually repulsed. Unfortunately, the subtler daily violence of economic growth (lead contamination, lapsed safety codes, or denied health care) often slips under the radar. Episodes like the *Zong* massacre or Indian farmer suicides are particularly noticeable instantiations of the violence innate to the pursuit of perpetual economic growth. "The *Zong* massacre is a cautionary tale of how moral outrage at instances of overt racial violence can obscure the more subtle and persistent relationship between race and finance."[54] The *Zong* massacre was atrocious, but similar cruelties occur every day in efforts to accumulate wealth.

The *Zong* massacre forces the naturalized logic of economic

growth to stare into its own abyssal depravity. It wasn't slavery alone that elicited the mass repulsion but rather the entanglement of exploitative terror with the everyday world of insurance that shocked the public. "The *Zong* legal hearings in 1783 revealed the links between the staid world of insurance and the violent world of the slave ships."[55] The *Zong* massacre "came to represent the depravity and heartless violence of the entire slave system."[56]

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A few salient points arise regarding the role of insurance in perpetuating the naturalization of economic growth and its banal terror. Immediately jarring is the nonchalant, flippant attitude of the ship owners and their defenders. The process of dehumanization necessary to carry out the Atlantic slave trade has been much commented on.[57] The *Zong* massacre, however, may have been the first incident that illustrated this fact so starkly for contemporaneous populations. It seems to have dawned on many Britons that there is one crucial difference between cotton, tobacco, sugar, and Africans: cotton, tobacco, and sugar can't be murdered but Africans can. This simple realization led to a "changing sensibility among the British—their rejection of a lucrative habit."[58] Indeed, newspapers framed the incident as a mass murder from which the culprits attempted to profit.

Regarding slavery, "few *thought* about the morality of that 'beneficial' business."[59] Slavery was perpetuated by a lack of thinking. This lack of critical thinking is perhaps more implicated in perpetuating slavery (and other genocides) than active dehumanization.[60] At the time of the *Zong* massacre, "contrary to widespread belief, slavery had *never* been approved in English law."[61] This is rather striking, as it suggests that the entire institution of slavery in Britain was simply accepted *without thinking*. There was no moment of deliberation during which the practice was decided to be a worthwhile endeavor. It was simply a practice undertaken by businesspeople, investors, and landholders that no governing body had the prerogative or capacity to outlaw.

While it is difficult to imagine a crueler form of economic activity than slavery, one must wonder if there are similar aspects of present society that have been similarly accepted *without thinking*. For Britain, the assumption seems to be that any lucrative practice was by default allowed. Profitable activities become quickly naturalized, like slavery or the use of fossil fuels.

We might draw some inspiration from the widespread condemnation of the incident at the time. When faced with it, the repulsion felt in the eighteenth century toward slavery was just as strong as in the twenty-first century. “In 1783, and today, the language and imagery used in Mansfield’s court caused enormous offence.”[62] Twenty-first century consumers in the Eurowest, much like the English in the eighteenth, are not regularly exposed to the processes through which commodities are produced; the processes through which wealth is extracted from the oppressed. Incidents like the *Zong* massacre reveal the horrific methods by which the economy expands: the majority world (Global South) has its labor and resources extracted; the working class has their wealth extracted; and some 1 percent to 10 percent of the population absorbs all that wealth. While not legal, there is still slavery today in some mining and fishing operations. And, of course, contemporary textile production may not rely on chattel slavery but does rely on *forced* labor compensated at as little as three cents per hour.[63]

Interestingly, in the *Zong* story the insurance company is often portrayed positively for refusing to pay out the claim on the dead captives. But it was precisely because of the services offered by the company that the victims were killed. Insurance “was not simply an extant technology that slave traders took advantage of by happy coincidence. The rise of the slave trade itself was one of the *primary motivators* leading to a robust insurance industry.”[64]

The *Zong* owners didn’t get in trouble for murdering 132 people but instead for insurance fraud (actually they didn’t get in trouble at all, just endured negative press). The crew of the *Zong* killed the captives because of the possibility of being compensated for their murder. The *Zong* owners were insured against the possibility of captive Africans striving for freedom (rebelling). There were

numerous attempts to revolt during transatlantic crossings (thus why such circumstances were insurable), just not on the *Zong* .[65] Cruelty toward captives, both docile and rebellious, is well-documented. It's worth iterating Walvin's point that the most obscene murders of African captives (beheadings and other desecrations) "were normally not capricious; they were calculated."[66] Rather than an impulsive aberration, cruelty was systemically normalized and financially rewarded.

In one of the most haunting episodes from the *Zong*, one of the captives who spoke English pleaded with the crew that they would rather have reduced rations of water and food than be tossed overboard (the screams of the drowning captives had been so terrifying). This perspective dismantles any of the *Zong*'s residual arguments about the "necessity" of the atrocity.

You're Probably Going to Die

The riskless growth of wealth (i.e., through interest) was illegal in much of Europe up to the nineteenth century. The invention of risk was necessary to legally practice the perpetual growth of excess wealth (i.e., capitalism). Risk was invented to give the illusion of plausible deniability to financiers. Risk to this day allows financiers to feign uncertainty about whether their actions will be profitable. The dominant global economy today operates under this illusion. "The viability of modern banking is premised on the element of ineradicable uncertainty."[67]

Concurrent with the invention of risk, those most eager and obliged to grow their wealth increasingly sought methods of tranquilizing and defanging risk—diminishing any potential harm of uncertainty. Put simply, bankers invented risk to make it appear that their gains were not certain, while they do everything in their power to increase the certainty of their gain. While the gains of any individual financial company are never totally secure, when one does fail, its assets are absorbed by other institutions, thus further

contributing to asymmetrical aggregation of wealth.

Ewald cites nineteenth-century French novelist Edmond About's telling views on the virtue of such concentrated accumulation: "The destruction of capital is a calamity that weighs not only on the ruined man but also on all humanity. . . . The creation of capital does not enrich the individual but the entire species. Of all the mechanisms that have been invented to . . . build more capital on earth, the most ingenious and honest is insurance. It is through insurance that we all become capitalists in a given time."[68] Ewald and About are quite right, "It is through insurance that we all become capitalists." Uninsured things make economic growth less certain.

Probability has become an incredibly lucrative tool for maximizing insurance's profits. "Insurance is not initially a practice of compensation or reparation. It is the practice of a certain type of rationality: one formalized by the calculus of probabilities."[69] Probability was invented to make money. Explicitly. Probabilistic reasoning was not developed to improve knowledge or advance science. The first person to work on the math of probabilistic reasoning, Gerolamo Cardano, was attempting to improve his gambling fortunes. He was attempting to figure a way to gamble that would transform "uncertain gain" (my definition of risk) into certain gain. It is "the very element of uncertainty that had distinguished the legal aleatory from the illegal usurious contract," but with statistics and probability, this uncertainty "almost disappeared in this new long-term perspective."[70]

The invention of risk opened the conceptual space for the creation of probability. The mathematics of probability was not particularly new or complex. What was new to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was the idea that the likelihoods of future *events* could be quantified and calculated. For some, the very definition of risk, what distinguishes it from danger or chance, is that it can be quantified and calculated. "For an event to be a risk, it must be possible to evaluate its probability."[71] Many economists agree that through the ability to quantify the future "commerce was able to free itself from the conditions of extreme uncertainty . . . to become a field of activity in which it was finally possible to apply calculation and economic

rationality."[72] This "extreme uncertainty," though, was born from capitalizing economic relations.

As calculations of probability were further developed by Pascal and Fermat, it continued to be theorized through games of chance. "Gambling provided the bread-and-butter problems for all the mathematical texts."[73] Both insurance and probability had negative public perceptions at the beginning of the nineteenth century. They were inseparably associated with gambling, recklessness, avarice, and naivety. Probability was simply not trusted. The word "probable" meant nearly the opposite of what it means today. In the eighteenth century, potentialities would be dismissed as "merely probable," meaning unlikely.[74] Likewise, purchasing insurance was seen as an unnecessary gamble by most Christians. "From its first widespread commercial use in fifteenth-century Genoa, insurance was much more closely associated with games of chance and wagers than with the virtue of collective foresight."[75]

This early suspicion of insurance was not naivety. It was an understandable resistance to individualizing and privatizing collective care, resistance to the normalization of capitalist extortion. Capitalism is everywhere resisted until that resistance becomes illegal (as such, it is illegal today not to have many types of insurance in the US). The suspicion of insurance wasn't overcome because the population gradually realized it was a wonderful invention. Rather, it was the introduction and marketing of life insurance as a form of responsible protection for widows and children, as opposed to irresponsible speculation. "Since the beginning of the nineteenth century . . . life insurance, [was] both prudent and tantamount to a moral duty."[76] Life insurance converted the cold fiscal tool of insurance into the "personification of caring sympathy . . . life insurance branded itself as one of the happiest contrivances of modern times."[77]

Timothy Alborn collects some nineteenth-century claims of insurance invoking probability: "Death and disease pursue their mission according to a law as rigid and mathematical as that of the planetary orbits." "Life insurance rests upon laws as certain in their operations as the movements of the heavenly bodies." "Mortality is

subject to a law as immutable as the law of gravitation."[78] Such proclamations attempt to remove the speculative (uncertain) aspect of insurance. Critical to these assertions are statistical mechanics. "Over the course of the nineteenth century, statistics in Great Britain went from being a superficial fashion . . . to being an unseen foundation of modernity."[79]

Ewald is enamored with statistics, arguing that "the theory of the average man announces the era when perfection will be identified with normality, when social morality's great imperative will be to normalize."[80] It is difficult to find much sympathy with this equating of perfection with normality, the elimination of exceptions and oddities. For some, the exceptions and the oddities are what make life worth living.

Ewald makes a fascinating connection between insurance and classical liberalism (the privileging of individual liberties over group well-being), suggesting foresight is the core of individual responsibility. He offers a common line of thought regarding responsibility and insurance: "To insure oneself is not only an individual duty, in the sense that to not be insured 'is to commit an act of selfishness and to be guilty of carelessness against one's family . . . , to take responsibility of one's future misery.' . . . those who do not insure themselves become a double burden for society, due to the assistance they will require if they are the victim of an accident."[81] Ewald is essentially calling those who resist participation in neoliberalism a burden. In such thinking, *anything* that inhibits the growth of wealth is a burden.

Ewald callously points out how insurance has come to alter traditional notions of health and well-being. "The practice of life, health, and accident insurance constantly attests that everything can have a price, that all of us have a price and that this price is not the same for all."[82] Less enthusiastically, Alborn notes, "More directly than any other enterprise apart from slavery, life insurance set a price on human life. . . . Besides drawing attention to the many links between life and property, *life insurance taught consumers to connect the prospect of living with the growth of capital*."[83] To be alive is to be capital. Such sentiments were reproached in the

eighteenth century when Portalis argued, “Life should not be commercialized; death cannot become a matter of speculation. These kinds of wagers on the life or death of a human being are odious, and they cannot exist without danger.”[84]

Analyzing how life insurance outfits utilized the “reproductive power of interest,” Alborn argues, “From its earliest appearance, life insurance was always about the accumulation of capital . . . [life insurers] established themselves among Britain’s biggest institutional investors.”[85] With life insurance, the line between insurance and investment is particularly fuzzy. “Many forms of life insurance are thinly veiled investment methods.”[86]

The life insurance trade is so lucrative and risk-free that it feels like it must be a scam. “Regardless of how life insurance offices divided their surpluses, the fact that surplus existed indicated that they were charging more than was necessary to meet the basic contingency of premature death.”[87] Indeed, “life insurance offices had to find outlets for their rapidly growing accumulation of capital,” lending money to embattled governments, buying municipal bonds, and moving into the stock market.[88] In the nineteenth century, flush life insurance companies offered mortgages to assist aristocrats in collateralizing their landholdings. “When rental income dried up . . . a wave of bankruptcies transferred huge tracts of mortgaged land to insurance companies, which evicted tenants by the hundreds.”[89] Like a good neighbor.

Death has long been profitable. Prior to the nineteenth century, the primary method of monetizing death was the annuity.[90] Annuities are purchased with a large upfront payment, then the buyer receives an annual payment for the rest of their life. This obviously creates perverse incentives—the seller of the annuity wants the buyer to die as soon as possible. “Whereas annuities were primarily investments, disguised loans with interest, life insurance was a wager. . . . Life insurance understood as a bet was outlawed in the codes of the Low Countries (1570). . . . The Code of the Low Countries [grouped] insurance on lives together with ‘abuses, frauds and crimes . . . wagers on voyages and similar inventions’ and banned the lot of them. . . . By the end of the seventeenth century, life insurance was

illegal almost everywhere in Europe except in Naples and England."[91] By the nineteenth century, life insurance had become more widespread, and the dynamics of for-profit mortality began to reverse.[92] Life insurance companies hope for policy holders to live as long as possible so that monthly payments keep coming and accruing interest.

Health Care

There is a widely held belief that we are healthier today than in the past—that modern health care has "provided the means to living better than one's ancestors"—despite the globally pervasive spread of diabetes, malnutrition, a cornucopia of carcinogens, looming pandemics, and widespread psychological distress.[93] It may be the case that Eurowestern populations are healthier today than they were in 1800 (when the Eurowest was beginning the industrialization process), but it is less convincing that we are healthier today than in 1000 CE or 200 BCE. Ethnographic studies show that, generally, those with access to first-world medicine spend the same percentage of their time on this planet being ill as those without, though the latter tend to spend less money on pharmaceutical products.[94] Capitalized health care is very good at keeping people alive, but "not dead" and healthy aren't precisely the same.

The profit incentive to keep people alive (accentuated by life insurance) has largely shaped medical and pharmaceutical research over the past century. Prior to initiatives of twentieth-century life insurance companies, doctors only interacted with the sick. The idea of checkups, of doctor's ministering to healthy bodies, developed from life insurance. Like a good neighbor, life insurance companies want to make sure you're feeling okay, while quantifying, datafying, and monetizing your body. The impetus for life insurance to collect data is why we now get our blood pressures, temperatures, and weights measured when at the doctor for a checkup.[95]

Thus, while average life expectancy has risen dramatically in

affluent countries over the past century, a cynic might say this increase has less to do with improved medicine, education, and sanitation than it does with the need of the health and life insurance industries to requisition middle-class incomes. Life expectancy is not an unproblematic measure of health. “We create longevity as the most desirable future, applaud the pursuit of long life (under any circumstances), and pathologize modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity.”[96] Death is considered a failure to live, so much so that the market for life extension solutions is thriving. From vitamin supplements to cryogenics, the secular fear of death continues to drive the direction of “health care” research, but freezing our brains in a warehouse does not make anyone healthier, it just facilitates the delusion of endlessness upon which capitalism thrives.

The health care industry in the US is largely a wing of the insurance infrastructure. While pharmaceutical companies operate somewhat adjacent to insurance, they ultimately rely on insurance for sustaining their business model. In the US, where health care is dominated by private insurance companies, nearly any metric of well-being is significantly worse than nations with public health care systems. Troublingly, the Obama administration’s Affordable Care Act was not written to make health services more affordable but instead to make all US citizens have health insurance. This act epitomizes the prevailing inability to think outside of insurance. For those below the poverty line, free or cheap insurance is available through the act. But this “free” insurance is granted by the government paying private insurance companies to cover those below certain income thresholds. That is, insurance companies profit even when offering “free” coverage.

Insurance is so entwined with health and medical services in the US that it is difficult to speak of health services without invoking insurance. The very term “health care” is synonymous with one’s *provider* (i.e., health insurance company). So entwined is insurance with health services in the US that those who wish to expand access to such services (to make them more affordable) often speak of providing more insurance, offering cheaper or free *insurance*. This is a deeply embedded and revealing confusion. Insurance is conflated

with what it ostensibly insures—health and medical services. Rather than expanding access to health services, well-meaning advocates campaign for greater access to insurance, as though insurance is the thing that makes us healthier.[97]

Champion of health care for all, Senator Bernie Sanders, says on the floor of the Senate: “It is not acceptable to me . . . that over 70 million Americans today are either uninsured or under-insured. As we speak right now . . . there are millions of people in our country who would like to go to a doctor . . . but simply cannot afford to do so.”[98]

The confusion here is the assertion that insurance protects us from the various precarities of the world. Insurance doesn’t prevent harm, nor does it treat illness. Fire insurance doesn’t prevent fires; flood insurance doesn’t prevent floods. What insurance insures, going back to the Medici, is the value of wealth. “Private insurance typically protects only against loss to capital assets. In insurance terms, one’s life . . . has no specific value apart from its money-making potential.”[99] Insurance protects our ability to continue growing wealth. Frustratingly, Ewald acknowledges as much, though doesn’t see it as problematic: “What is insured is not the injury that is actually . . . suffered. . . . The lived injury is irreparable.”[100]

Under neoliberalism, responsibility for well-being shifts from the society to the individual. Individuals must buy security as opposed to it simply being a condition of belonging to a group. “Insurance is a security measure linked to individualism. It is the offspring of a capitalist ethos.”[101] The whole point of hominids organizing themselves into societies, tribes, bands, or chiefdoms for the past six million years was to share responsibility, freely. That is, neoliberal security and responsibility unravel the entire impetus for living in a society.

Ewald is correct in claiming “societies envisage themselves as a vast system of insurance.”[102] Yes, traditionally the society has been the insurance. Insurance wasn’t something you needed to buy; it was something that came with living in a society.[103] Making insurance a purchasable commodity dissolves the reason for living in groups. Margaret Thatcher was right, under neoliberalism there’s no such thing as society.

Apocalypse Insurance

Headlines over the past few years have reported on “apocalypse insurance.” This term usually refers to the super-rich attempting to procure large swaths of land, helicopters, and luxury bunkers.[104] The idea that the end of the world can be insured against is indicative of the underlying ethos of insurance. Rather than Ewald’s basis for social agreement on how best to confront peril, “apocalypse insurance” is a tool for resigning ourselves to cataclysmic conditions, as opposed to confronting them, for abandoning compassion and shared responsibility.

The future is dependent on insurance. “To calculate risk is to master time, to discipline the future.”[105] As such, insurers are very concerned with climate change, but it’s a peculiar concern.[106] Mitigating climate change or preventing calamity is not necessarily the goal. Actuaries valuate the future, such that it doesn’t really matter if a calamity occurs as long as the premiums accurately reflect the risk level.[107]

“Insurance is linked to a civilization that makes recognizing risk a moral imperative, a principle of rational conduct.”[108] But “risk” by Ewald’s account was simply a concept born from efforts to deceive the Church, bypass usury prohibitions. It is troubling to assert that a concept born of deception is a moral imperative. Ewald claims “insurance occupies itself with truth and does not compromise with it” yet simultaneously admits that insurance was developed to obfuscate and confuse.[109]

Ewald mocks the idea that “responsibility is the most perfect regulator of human action,” suggesting the only way to regulate human action is through financial incentives and disincentives.[110] Rather than insurance being commodified responsibility as Ewald believes, it is perhaps more accurately a fee we pay for the right to be irresponsible. “Economic science . . . relieved people of responsibility for their acts. They became ‘servants of capital’ in which economic rationality was disembodied. They no longer had to accept responsibility for their own decisions since these were no

longer attributable to them in person but were the result of a rigorously impersonal calculation procedure."[111] For Ewald, to be properly responsible, one must buy insurance so they don't have to think about the repercussions of their actions. Insurance allows us to be irresponsible "servants of capital."

The future is insured. Insurance naturalizes an endless capitalized future. If we take seriously the frequently quoted Fredric Jameson remark about it being easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, how exactly could capitalism exist without a world? [112] Insurance is the short answer. The insured future will exist long beyond the world. Hypothetical things aren't bound to the physicality of the world. Capital requires a *future* much more than a *world*. The future of insurance "is a timescape that, whatever our ethical mediation of it, generates inequality."[113]

"Insurance institutions . . . need to have quasi-infinite longevity . . . thus positing the survival of society for an indefinite future."[114] The probabilistic modeling of insurance is used to colonize the future with the dominant economic reasoning of the present. There is a very real threat of insuring ourselves to death—buying more and more insurance against apocalyptic conditions instead of trying to avert apocalyptic conditions. Insurance is a means of deferring responsibility, a means of buying the right to abdicate responsibility. While we have copious quantitative metrics for risk, there are no such standardized metrics for responsibility. If what a population measures is taken as a proxy for a population's values, then clearly responsibility is not very important to capitalized populations.

Capitalism hides its endemic violence through the rhetoric of insurance as a product one can buy to provide protection and safety. It's an old racket—pay into insurance for protection against the impoverishment that capitalism produces. "Like good racketeers, insurance companies often claim to be your friend."[115] But insurance is not some market-based altruistic service. Climate change is even portrayed as an opportunity for increasing profits by some, revealing the hollowness of insurance's friendship.[116]

Terribly Virtuous Society

“Insurance proves itself a new privilege for the rich and a cruel irony for the poor.”[117] As Ferreira da Silva’s Black feminist poethics alludes, looming climate confrontations will be between those who wish to end today’s dominant (exploitative) *way* of life and those who wish to end *life*.

Climate change forebodes a great deal of destruction. Hurricane Katrina was estimated to have caused $150 billion in damages. But under the regime of insurance, this does not result in a loss of wealth but rather a further aggregation of wealth into fewer hands. Individuals who lost homes may have been further impoverished, but wealth holders could accumulate abandoned property and build more expensive housing. Ewald expresses some curious ideas regarding accumulation and destruction. Again, drawing on nineteenth-century novelist and journalist Edmond About on the dispersal of wealth into more hands, “You have scattered it, you little idiot. You have disrupted the cohesion that gave strength to capital.”[118] Here it is portrayed as responsible to aggregate wealth into fewer and fewer hands because this gives “strength to capital.”

What seems to underlie the disagreeable aspects of Ewald’s analysis is his confusion of accumulation with solidarity. He confuses aggregation (in the sense that every individual aggregated creates an average) with the solidarity that comes from people uniting behind a common cause. Solidarity *can* be conceived as people coming together to make common cause, and accumulation *can* be conceived of as the bringing together of resources. However, solidarity is about inclusion in power, while accumulation is about exclusion.

I agree that “insurance . . . assumes a structure in which each person can objectify themselves, individually and in relation to others. It turns man into capital.”[119] Ewald sees this objectification and capitalization as socially beneficial, inspiring a perverse form of solidarity. I find it difficult to perceive of this process as anything other than atomizing and dehumanizing. In the end, Ewald sees

society based on insurance as utopian. “Far from being a society without values, a society founded on insurance is a . . . terribly virtuous society. . . . Insurance’s key values render a society founded on insurance something like a utopia.”[120] From the *Zong* massacre to the denial of health care in the US, this utopia is awfully heartless and violent.

It should be noted that after being a student of Michel Foucault in the 1970s, Ewald has spent the last thirty years working for a French insurance lobby. Whether he took this job because of his passion for insurance or if his passion for insurance is a result of his work with this lobby is unclear. Ewald writes that insurance’s “considerable success has yet to be refuted.”[121] He is not wrong, if by *success* he means insurance’s ability to facilitate the accelerating asymmetrical growth of wealth. However, if by success he means improvement in the well-being of populations, there remains much room for debate.

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1 Evan Mills, “Insurance in a Climate of Change,” *Science* 309 (2005): 1040–44.

2 Adrian Leonard, *Marine Insurance: Origins and Institutions, 1300–1850* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 2.

3 François Ewald, “Insurance and Risk,” in *Foucault Effect*, ed. Graham Burchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 209.

4 Ewald, “Insurance,” 207.

5 Ewald, “Insurance,” 208.

6 Lorraine Daston, *Classical Probability in the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 185.

7 François Ewald, “The Values of Insurance,” *Grey Room* 74 (2019): 120.

8 Leonard, *Marine*, 6.

9 Malinowski, *Argonauts*.

10 Leonard, *Marine*, 10, emphasis added.
11 Jean Halpérin, *Les Assurances en Suisse et Dans le Monde: Leur Rôle dans L'évolution Économique et Sociale* (Neufchâtel: Editions de la Baconnière, 1946), 28.
12 Blatant acts of wealth destruction today, such as the artist Banksy's shredding of their own artwork, contribute to the generation of more wealth.
13 De Roover, "New Interpretations," 42.
14 Ewald, "Insurance," 206–7.
15 Mattick, *Return of Inflation*, 108.
16 Koyama, "Evading," 6.
17 Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, "Feminist Reflections on Vulnerability: Disrespect, Obligation, Action," *SubStance* 42, no. 3 (2013): 67.
18 Scott W. Schwartz, "Measuring Vulnerability and Deferring Responsibility: Quantifying the Anthropocene," *Theory, Culture and Society* 36, no. 4 (2019): 73–93.
19 Böhm-Bawerk, *Capital*, 50.
20 Glaeser and Scheinkman, "Neither a Borrower."
21 Ewald, "Insurance," 198–99.
22 Ewald, "Insurance," 199.
23 Ewald, "Insurance," 200.
24 Rodney Harrison, "Heritage," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Contemporary World*, eds. Paul Graves-Brown, Rodney Harrison and Angela Piccini (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 275.
25 Azpilcueta, *On Exchange*, 11.
26 Azpilcueta, *On Exchange*, 7.

27 Daston, *Classical Probability*, 117.
28
Andrea Addobbati, “Italy 1500–1800: Cooperation and Competition,” in *Marine Insurance*, ed. A. Leonard (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 47.
29 Leonard, *Marine*, 8.
30 Leonard, quoting Francis Bacon, *Marine*, 3.
31 Also: “Insurance appears to have been invented independently by the merchants of Italy and those of India. . . . The European practice of sharing individual risks between multiple underwriters seems to have been absent in India, however, leading to ‘considerable capital and cash flow problems’” (Leonard, *Marine*, 5). Here I would interrogate the characterization of this aspect of Indian insurance as a “problem.” The reason that lack of capital and cash flow are considered problematic by modern writers is because it inhibits ever larger pools of wealth from being aggregated. Lack of capital is not problematic if your society is not based on the perpetual growth of wealth.
32
Piccinno, “Genoa,” 25.
33 Azpilcueta, *On Exchange*, 10.
34 Long-distance trading has been referred to as “armed commerce” and “a mild form of war” (Guy Chet, “Britain and America 1650–1850: Harmonising Government and Commerce,” in *Marine Insurance*, ed. A. Leonard (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 252).
35 Piracy actually grew the overall economy by expanding the insurance market (Leonard, *Marine*, 87).
36 Halpérin, *Les Assurances*, 22. Halpérin continues, “The spread of insurance goes hand in hand with the dismantling of feudal solidarity and the freeing and autonomy of the

individual” (120).
37
Piccinno, “Genoa,” 27.
38 Underwriting was a frequent side hustle for the wealthy.
39 Addobbati, “Italy.”
40 Sabine Go, “Amsterdam 1585–1790: Emergence, Dominance, and Decline,” in *Marine Insurance*, ed. A. Leonard (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 106–29.
41
Anastasia Bogatyreva, “England 1660–1720: Corporate or Private?” in *Marine Insurance*, ed. A. Leonard (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 178–203.
42 Piccinno, “Genoa,” 33.
43 Guido Rossi, “England 1523–1601: The Beginnings of Marine Insurance,” in: *Marine Insurance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 135.
44
Piccinno, “Genoa,” 27.
45 Gorz, *Critique*, 112.
46 Piccinno, “Genoa,” 28.
47
James Walvin, *The Zong: A Massacre, the Law and the End of Slavery* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 124.
48 Typical of the Atlantic “triangle” slave trade, Liverpool ships sent textiles to Africa for sale, purchased enslaved people in Africa, sold these captives in the Americas, then picked up cotton (or tobacco or sugar) and shipped it back to Britain.
49
Regarding other slave-ship uprisings, Walvin writes, “Killing Africans on slave ships was not uncommon. . . . Everyone involved in the slave trade—from the grandest merchant to the roughest of deck hands—knew that there were times when the

crew might have to kill the very people they had been sent to trade for, and for whom they paid such high sums . . . a crude human calculus had evolved at the heart of the slave trade . . . : to survive, it was sometimes necessary to kill, most commonly when faced by shipboard insurrection" (Walvin, *Zong*, 107–8).
50 Walvin, *Zong*, 2.
51
Walvin, *Zong*, 113.
52 Walvin, *Zong*, 146.
53 Walvin, *Zong*, 136.
54
Kish and Leroy, "Bonded Life" : 641.
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Chapter Five: A Widespread Mania (Investment)

“The logic of the world we inhabit today is dependent on the . . . performance of infinite economic growth.”[1] Capitalism is a performance. This practice of performing infinite economic growth requires a pretense, a dramatization of empirical conditions. Can we stop pretending infinite economic growth is possible? The performance of concern in this chapter is that undertaken in the stock market. This includes both the efforts of public corporations to appear as good investments and the theatrics of traders and investment houses presenting deceptions and misdirections to their competitors and customers. While the stock market is being performed by wealth holders (or representatives of wealth holders) to facilitate perpetually accelerating economic growth, the repercussions of this pretense have violent consequences for involuntary bystanders.

Analyzing theatrical performances in plague-ridden Europe, Antonin Artaud suggests theater “infinitely extends the frontiers of what we call reality,” and “reforges the links between what does and does not exist, between the virtual nature of the possible and the material nature of existence.”[2] One could say nearly the same about capitalizing. Capitalism is make-believe. Pursuing perpetual accumulation demands a normalized state of the world with no corollary in reality—inexhaustible resources. Instruments like derivatives (financial contracts that pre-program future values) exemplify this fantasy. “Derivatives contracts are intrinsically performative in that they fabricate the conditions of their own existence—much in the way that saying the word promise and its

acceptance brings that promise . . . into existence."[3]

Without question, capitalized social organization requires great imagination. It takes incredible imaginative faculties to pretend the horrors of economic growth do not exist just so those of us in the minority world (first world) may comfortably cool our homes or reheat our lasagna or play online Scrabble. The stock market is the clearest embodiment of these capital fantasies.

In the US, the wealthiest 10 percent own nearly 90 percent of all US stocks.[4] Thus, for most Americans, the rise or fall of a company's share price would seem to be rather insignificant. Yet, as seen in the Great Depression or 2008 collapse, the dealings of stock exchangers have great impact on those who do not own any shares. Further, the marginalized citizens of the majority world (Global South) are so removed from the daily fluctuations of Wall Street that one would think their lives would be immune to such volatility. Unfortunately, the *performance* of Apple's share price (for example) can have direct impact on the residents of Ugandan landfills (for example).

While it is easy to caricature and vilify the obscene behavior of "Wall Street types" (think Oliver Stone's *Wall Street*, Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street*, or Michael Lewis's *Liar's Poker*), and such characters *are* despicable, it is worth thinking about how such heinous behaviors do become valorized and rewarded. There are ample "ethnographies of Wall Street" that discuss the beliefs and behaviors of such "cultures," including how they perceive time, their values and assumptions, and how they reproduce themselves and their identities.[5]

Complementing such work, this chapter considers the philosophy and concept of maximization. Embedded in capitalist social relations is an inalienable tendency toward the pursuit of the maximal. With the underlying prerogative to perpetually accelerate the growth of wealth comes the prerogative to constantly maximize output (profit). This maximal ethos applies not only to wealth accumulation but also artistic, cultural, or political undertakings.

At various points over the past decade, stock prices have soared while profits themselves have plateaued. The investment sector is

such a large part of the wealth generated by Western economies, that this *fictional performance* of economic activity (stock trading) has overtaken *tactile* economic activity. Whereas practices of financing, selling public shares, and offering stocks began as a means of raising revenue for commodity production, transportation, and research and development, today this function is nearly completely reversed. The physical production of companies (like Tesla, for example) is merely a means for financial speculation. What used to be called the "real" economy (physical goods and services) was serviced through financing; now this "real" economy is subservient to finance and exists as a platform upon which to expand financial markets. For many of today's wealthiest, the economy *is* the stock market.

The following sections examine how this fictionalized, hypothetical, speculative drama—the stock market—rose to such eminence from the seventeenth century onward.

Taking Stock

In the first years of the seventeenth century, stock trading was formally integrated into the financial matrix of banking (lending) and insurance. Together these three activities have come to overwhelm global sociopolitics. The earliest notable companies to "go public" were maritime shipping outfits, famously the Dutch and British East India companies, which developed alongside Europe's global expansion.

Promoting finance's positive impact on today's world, economist William Goetzmann offers a rather inhuman reading of the European invasion of the Americas, "Columbus had to wait patiently for the funding of his first transatlantic voyage, and then he had to promise the future unknown profits to his benefactors. . . . Without this intertemporal contracting, he might never have set sail."[6] The callous logic here is that financing allowed Columbus to make his voyage to the Americas. Obviously. But Goetzmann cites this use of financing

as evidence of its beneficence. The suggestion is that without financing Columbus could never have directly slaughtered dozens of Indigenous people and indirectly slaughtered millions. This is explicit evidence of the sociopathy of normalizing economic growth. Wouldn't it be better if Europe never got to destroy Indigenous North American civilizations? Do we not now agree that that was an atrocity? Well, Goetzmann lauds financing for setting off the greatest genocide the planet has ever seen. Columbus's expedition led to the apocalypse of the Americas. Goetzmann sees this as a virtue rather than a drawback of financialization.[7]

As global trade and extraction became more streamlined, financing began to come from more diverse individual sources operating outside state sovereignty.[8] Rather than rely on the treasuries of Queen Isabella, resource extraction expeditions could be funded by the joint contributions of smaller investors, leading to the emergence of joint-stock companies. "Joint-stock companies had existed in England since the mid-sixteenth century, but it was only in the 1680s that an active London market developed for buying and selling shares in these companies."[9] The coinciding rise of Lloyds of London, the Bank of England, and stock exchanging on the heels of the Glorious Revolution was no accident. "The number of companies listed . . . grew rapidly: in 1689, there were fewer than 20 joint-stock companies whose shares were announced for sale; by 1695, this number had grown to about 150."[10]

Poovey cites contemporaneous perspectives on the performative aspect of this new kind of economic activity. "Our noble Trade had degenerated into Trick, and instead of employing a Stock in honest and generous Adventures abroad, according to the laudable Practice of Merchants; There is lately set up a new Society of Artificers, who blow the Price of Stock up and down, as best suits their Design of enriching themselves by the ruin of others; and this Legerdemain is manag'd by a strange sort of Insects call'd Stock-Jobbers, who devour men on our Exchange, as the Locusts of old did the Herbage of Egypt."[11] This 1691 characterization of Stock-Jobbers could be easily applied (with more modern expletives) to those responsible for the 2008 financial collapse.

There are two ways (at least) of reading such historical sentiments. Sadly, when many readers learn that residents of the seventeenth century endured and expressed similar economic sentiments as today, there is a tendency to naturalize these feelings. This results in the erroneous and dangerous statements like “there has always been greed” or “people are *naturally* greedy.” This thinking needs pushback. An alternate reading of the persistence of these economic sentiments is an incredulity that nothing has been done to remedy these concerns over the past three hundred years.

The tangible contribution that anthropology offers to the contemporary world is an elasticity of perspective. When hearing that an economic practice or sentiment has been common for three hundred years among people of upper-class European descent, this should *not* be considered evidence that such practices (e.g., manipulative greed) are normal or natural. That we do often respond to such facts in this manner is evidence of the extent to which the thoughts of wealthier Europeans have colonized the global imagination.

From anthropology, we learn that the perspectives and values of wealthier Europeans are incredibly rare around the world and throughout time. Usually, when societies encounter a persistent problem (such as incentivized dishonesty) they enact reforms to eliminate the unwanted behavior. It is rare for a people to identify a persistent problem that causes social disharmony and not only do nothing to rectify it but instead come to accept social disharmony as a normal state of affairs. Today’s dominant political order oddly accepts social disharmony as natural.

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Stock exchanges would not have emerged without increasing normalization of interest-based lending and the insurance necessary to sell risk alongside profit. Stock exchanges are a systemization, a formalization of the economic imperatives of an interest-based economy. The stock market is the imperative to grow wealth in action. Regular production is constrained by annoying materials,

stock trading can amplify economic growth beyond the finitude of materials.

Lending and stock exchanging work together to not simply create growth but *maximal* growth. It is underappreciated that large-volume investing is often driven by lending in the same manner as real estate development, for example. As theologian Kathryn Tanner spells out, if you invest $100 of your own money and make $101, your wealth has gone up only 1 percent.[12] However, if you borrow $99 and put in $1 of your own and get $101 out of it, your wealth goes up 50 percent. In each case you're only getting one extra dollar, but in the latter scenario you are doubling your money while growing the money of the lender through the interest you owe. This relatively simple mechanism for maximally growing money is, of course, amplified through more complex financial instruments, such as credit default swaps.

Addobbati articulates the close overlap between the earliest forms of insurance and stock trading: "Joint-stock companies [were] no longer a fellowship of people interested in damage control, but limited liability companies strategically oriented to making a profit."[13] Both insurance and stock markets have the effect of individualizing collective action. Advocates argue these activities are collective (insurance *shares* risk collectively, stocks *share* profits collectively). However, as discussed in the previous chapter, the ostensible function of insurance (supporting those who have fallen on hard times) is, in non-capitalized groups, free and the baseline function of living in a society. Likewise, profit sharing is expected and compulsory in most non-capitalized traditions.[14]

Some anthropologists frame gifts as "essentially a device for mutual insurance. A hunter with a good catch today will help out a less fortunate colleague because he knows that tomorrow the circumstances are likely to be reversed."[15] With commodification of profit and risk, this social behavior becomes something that individuals are responsible for purchasing on their own. That is, you have to buy access to collective sharing. One must now pay for sharing. Non-capitalized expeditions have been interpreted by anthropologists as subtexts for forging stronger group and social

bonds. The ceremonies and mythology that accompany open sea fishing voyages among Trobriand Islanders, for example, have been seen as a way of using potential danger to bring communities closer together. Upon a safe return, the bounty is then shared with the community.

In contrast, by commodifying pieces of an expedition, stock trading privatizes formerly collective practices. Formerly free social services, in the form of community support networks, became privatized. Insurance isn't some felicitous method of bringing people together for common protection but rather a method of profitizing services most communities do for free. Likewise, buying stocks in a company isn't a magnanimous innovation allowing us to share in Google's profits but rather a means of charging for access to a bounty that other communities might distribute freely. Capitalism first strips us of community, then sells it back to us.

As the confluence of banking, insurance, and stock trading erupted, it unleashed uncontrollable speculations as individuals competed to maximize returns on their investments. Even the theologian Azpilcueta encouraged this maximization in the sixteenth century: "Money pays better in the hands of merchants and money changers who invest it 'actively' than in other hands in which it may end up being hoarded."[16] To be sure, under today's dominant economic thinking, money does pay better in the hands of those who invest it actively than those who hoard it. However, it has not always been the case that "paying better" equated with simply more. In the above quote, the hoarding of money is given a negative connotation. Indeed, the word "hoard" has an association with selfishness, but as the word is used above, "hoard" could be replaced with a less antagonistic word like "held."

Azpilcueta's sentiment remains the dominant economic orthodoxy nearly five centuries later—wealth should not be stable or resting. Speaking to this innate instability, Tanner asserts, "The price of a financial asset at a later time does not yet exist. By definition, the future is nothing until it arrives."[17] It is the intertemporal speculation that underlies the dangerous speculative bubbles that have marked the past three centuries.

In selling joint-stocks, a company sells shares of its future profits. Buying shares is buying the assumed growth of wealth. This operation mandates that profits continue to rise. Working in concert with the mechanics of interest and insurance, stock exchanging makes economic growth an absolute imperative. This suggests that if we seriously want to challenge the virtue of economic growth or de-emphasize its role in society, it will mandate a concurrent reduction or devaluation of global stock markets. Such a prospect, obviously, would face stiff and violent resistance from those whose fortunes are tied to this economic sector.

Fevers and Panics

"As long as there have been financial bubbles, they have been seen as stark testaments to the limits of human reason."[18] From the inception of stock exchanging, the practice has always been accompanied by irrational speculation. This irrationality manifests as a willingness to pay more money for an object than it is worth. Through a combination of misinformation and ignorance, every few years such "exuberance" coalesces into a bubble in which a commodity or a company's share value becomes wildly inflated (i.e., numerous people come to believe that a stock will be worth significantly more in the future, for no good reason).

A widespread mania for tulips swept the Netherlands in the early seventeenth century, causing an Early Modern bubble. A fairly exotic commodity, the tulip emerged as a status symbol in the early 1600s. By the 1630s, "tulip futures" had grown astronomically detached from any possible use-value and the bubble burst in 1637. The tulip worked well as an early commodity of irrational exuberance precisely because its "use-value" was completely abstract. Its value was derived from the collective imagination. The abstract or imaginary are unbounded by material-empirical conditions. The value of the tulip derived from social status (rather than medicinal or culinary uses), allowing its value to be untethered. Useless commodities

(those without material use) can reach the highest values.[19]

Items of imaginary worth have no practical maximum value. Their value is only limited by the collective imagination. Imagination, however, is notoriously unstable. It is ephemeral, it can shift rapidly. Thus, just as the value of tulips can reach exorbitant heights, so too can it rapidly plummet. All joint-stock shares are largely imaginary commodities. Even if they represent a nuts-and-bolts resource like coal or microchips, the stock share itself is an imagined future value of the company. The entire stock market obeys these imaginary mechanics of valuation—high highs and low lows. The stock market is a performative exaggeration.

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The South Sea Company bubble of 1720 was less irrational and more duplicitous than the tulip craze. Founded in 1711, the South Sea Company had a similar business model to the East India Company—exclusive (government approved) trading rights to a particular region. The South Sea Company was meant to have a monopoly on British trade with South America. The primary commodity in this trade was captives from Africa to be sold into slavery. Indeed, in the end, the slave trade was the only profitable operation for the South Sea Company.

Unlike the tulip market, however, from its inception the existence of the South Sea Company was intentionally deceptive. The company's founders had no reasonable expectation that they would garner much profit at all. England was embroiled in conflicts with Spain and Portugal at the time, which controlled all South America, making trade with the region nearly impossible. In reality, the company's primary business was to deal in government debt, providing something of a competitor to the Bank of England. The company bought eleven million pounds of outstanding government debts by giving government creditors stock in the new company in exchange for their bonds.[20] Relying on insider trading and government bribes, the company's share prices soared to irrational heights (completely detached from the company's profits).

While the South Sea Company episode is “often represented as a collective madness or delusion, the South Sea mania might also be described as a period during which the continuum that linked fact to fiction became invisible or ceased to matter.”[21] Given this blurring of fact and fiction, Deringer suggests “we might ask whether financial crises are also epistemic crises.”[22] That is, are financial crises caused by bad knowledge? The Eurowest produces poor knowledge about economic activity, which is unfortunate because it spends so much time thinking about economics. Eurowestern economic knowledge is driven by the misguided assumption that maximal economic growth is good and normal, thus many of its conclusions are misleading.

Orthodox economists will readily admit that poor financial knowledge leads to poor financial decisions.[23] Unfortunately, many read the sentiment that bad knowledge leads to bad economic decisions as suggesting that there is an underlying thing called an “economy” that operates according to certain principles and that, based on the quality of knowledge available to us, we make decisions of various success.

It is not simply that we have bad (incorrect) knowledge; rather, we have dysfunctional knowledge. The idea that there exists some background phenomena called the economy about which we may produce good or bad knowledge is itself questionable. The idea that there is an economy that is supposed to grow is questionable. However, most economists believe “that the economy is . . . a stand-alone analytical object ripe for the mathematical taking.”[24]

The 2008 financial collapse was clearly premised on faulty knowledge. “Until the [2008] crisis the only official economic theory was that systemic failure is impossible.”[25] During the period from 1999 to 2008, it was believed that compartmentalizing different sectors of the economy would prevent collapse. However, much like the sinking of the *Titanic*, when one sector of the economy, like the subprime mortgage market, went under, it added more pressure on the whole ship, increasingly pulling the entire economy down. Like the *Titanic*, the architects of this economy boastfully claimed it was unsinkable—though the US government prevented financial

institutions from ending up at the bottom of the ocean by giving them a nearly $1 trillion bailout.

This knowledge we've developed about economics is like a broken, scratchy record that keeps repeating the same garbled mistakes. "Mainstream economics is replete with ideas that 'everyone knows' to be true, but that are actually arrant nonsense."[26] Eurocolonial knowledge production is distinctly inept when it comes to producing and managing ideas about economic activity (resource distribution).

The pattern is as grotesque as it is predictable. Since the eighteenth century, more and more money is accumulated, more and more exploitation occurs (of people and environments). Every decade or so there is a structural reshuffling that allows the further consolidation and concentration of wealth. There were notable stock market panics in 1819, 1825, 1837, 1857, 1869, 1873, 1884, 1893. Such panics do sometimes cause wealthy people to lose money, they do shift money around, but the overall pattern of these downturns in market value does not inhibit the centuries-long pattern of exponential economic growth. Panics occur in that passing moment when the imaginary and empirical economies meet, when capitalism's schizophrenia becomes transparent.

Again, Goetzmann offers a distressing analysis of the relationship between finance and Western knowledge production: "Finance also played a role in another key aspect of civilization: the development of knowledge. One important way that humankind learned about the boundaries of the world was through merchant voyages requiring money and time—underwritten by investors hopeful of a future profit."[27] This might be true, but implicit in Goetzmann's characterization is that colonialism was good for the planet because it allowed Europeans to learn geography lessons (despite the millions it killed and dispossessed). That Princeton University Press (publishers of Goetzmann's 2016 book), among others, still outputs scholarship that does not recognize that colonialism is and was detrimental (murderously exploitative of people and the planet) is hard to stomach. All the assumptions that motivated and legitimized European colonialism, very much including financing, need de-

normalizing.

The Roaring ’80s

The economic downturn of the 1970s, with its oil embargo and stagflation, opened the door to an amplified financialization of the global economy. “Prior to 1973, cross currency rates and interest rates . . . were extremely stable. The principle role of capital was to fund the production centric economies of the United States and Europe . . . two catalytic events of 1973 were the devolution of the Bretton Woods System that had regulated exchange rates since 1949 and instigation of an oil embargo that set off an inflationary fuse which led to the removal of interest rate ceilings.”[28]

Following World War II, much of the Western world experienced annual economic growth between 5 to 10 percent. In the 1970s, this fell closer to the post-1800 average of around 3 percent. The story of the global economy since the late 1970s has been the effort to artificially maintain and reignite growth rates. While strident efforts have been made to fuel this growth across many sectors, particularly through militaristically enforced majority world (Global South) “development” and indebtedness, most success in achieving maximal profits has occurred in stock markets. “In the competition among various economic fields for power . . . the financial field has come out victorious.”[29]

Since the mid-1970s, financial technology (i.e., tools and instruments meant to sell various pieces of the future) has exploded. Like the fifteenth-century explosion of negotiable instruments, the 1980s saw a burst of exotic financial tools, such as derivatives, asset-backed securities, collateralized debt obligations, and hedge funds (i.e., new methods of pooling debt and assets into securities, tradeable investments). “Nothing characterizes the financial period from 1973 to 2008 more than the unabated growth in the number, size, and leverage of EuroAmerican hedge funds . . . the proportion of US wealth held in financial assets has quadrupled since 1973.”[30]

Today Eurowestern reliance on the financial industry to drive the economy has become total. “For EuroAmerica, the unspoken objective is to remain dominant by developing speculatively based capital markets that are too sophisticated and innovative in the fabrication of financial instruments to be easily replicated.”[31]

In the 1980s, the previously marginal economic philosophy of Milton Friedman’s Chicago School overtook Keynesianism, giving rise to what is today called neoliberalism. Keynesianism generally believes there is a role for governments in stimulating economic growth and providing social safety nets that allow citizens to contribute to the growth of wealth even during downturns. These tenets run against the grain of Friedman’s supercharged ultra-liberalism but are not incompatible with free markets and corporate colonialism. Contrary to popular belief among the most ardent neoliberals, it is not an infringement on corporate sovereignty to provide welfare or public education.

By the 1980s, Keynes’s mild concessions to human dignity were subsumed by Friedman’s Chicago School ideology, summarized here:

> Corporations . . . ought to concern themselves solely with making profits for their stockholders. They should not interfere directly with issues like employment, pollution control, inflation etc. These should be left to the political mechanism which will ensure that people come together and decide how these things are to be settled. If corporations were to interfere directly by acting in a way that reduces pollution or reduces inflation etc. they would firstly be unfairly taxing their owners. Secondly, they would be endangering the sovereignty of the other members of society and thirdly, they would be fiddling in areas where the executives have little knowledge. . . . By sticking to the basic economic imperative of profit making, corporations would be ensuring that the tried and tested market mechanism produces the greatest good for the greatest number. So the corporation has no direct social obligation because it has no contract with society to ensure its

> welfare . . . the corporation is itself simply a fictitious entity that cannot have any social responsibilities whatsoever.[32]

Today we live in Friedman's world without social responsibility, a world where the only responsibility of good citizens is to contribute to the growth of the economy. Troublingly, corporations have rights (the 2010 *Citizens United* case ruled that corporations have the right to free speech), but they don't have responsibilities. Human citizens have a few responsibilities that come with our rights—paying taxes, signing up for the draft. While there are laws meant to dissuade corporate malfeasance, large companies often have the resources to maneuver around the legal apparatus. The "only obligation is to make profits within the bounds of the law for their stakeholders."[33]

Friedman's world of virtuous irresponsibility was naturalized throughout a single decade—the 1980s. It was not the prevailing ideology of the fortuitous postwar economic boom. The rise of "corporate social responsibility" in the past decades evinces the normalization of corporate abandonment of ethical obligations; behaving ethically is so peculiar we need to make it a specialized field.

A perversion of the financialized economy is that both political and corporate decisions (and they are basically indistinguishable) are based not necessarily on generating greater profits but on increasing share price—an "economic philosophy fixated on shareholder value."[34] Indeed, shareholder return is valued over all moral or ethical considerations. A company is being responsible if it is accomplishing this goal (according to the dominant logic today). "Speculative capital has elevated the notion of shareholder value to the point where participants have come to see it as the privileged and unquestioned measure of any firm's success. From this view, the slope of a company's stock price is the singular measure of its success. . . . The logic of shareholder value is thus allowing speculative capital to abstract the corporation from its own body."[35]

Border Securities

International trade agreements like NAFTA in 1993 have contributed substantially to shareholder profit maximation by deterritorializing (and reterritorializing) global economies. Such agreements allow the easy movement of commodities across borders untaxed, while simultaneously encouraging more militaristic controls on the movement of people. Following NAFTA, it was as though there were no borders for commodities. Commodities produced in Mexico were afforded the same legal dignity as those produced in Ohio. Migration policies are financial. Borders and nationalities are needed to constrain labor-value, ensuring higher profit margins and share prices.

Concurrent with the rise in legal respect afforded foreign-born commodities following NAFTA was an increased disrespect for humans born in Mexico and Central America. Since the creation of the Department of Homeland Security after 9/11, border policing has become increasingly militarized, and public rhetoric regarding border crossing has become increasingly vitriolic. Despite economic successes like the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Act (adding an estimated $280 billion to the economy from 2012 to 2022), public resentment of migrants seems fiercer than ever.

The conception and implementation of NAFTA was an entirely corporate-led initiative successfully passed into law by business lobbies—another example of the blurred lines between financial interests and government. Or, rather, it's not so much that lines are blurred, but that legislators explicitly view their job as facilitating the maximal growth of wealth: "Whether liberals or conservatives hold office . . . they are all committed to corporate-defined free trade."[36] There was no grassroots movement to implement NAFTA. NAFTA was not a proposed solution to some civic problem. No North Americans were sitting around saying, "I wish there were a law that would allow corporations to make more money."

Free-trade zones are sometimes pitched as encouraging congenial international relations between countries. They probably do make it more difficult for freely trading nations to go to war, but it is telling that if nations are incapable of maximizing their economic growth, war is a constant looming threat. The primary function of

trade agreements is to increase profit margins. “Enforcing labor rights and environmental protections runs contrary to the purpose for which NAFTA was negotiated—creating conditions favorable to *investment*.”[37]

Driving the inhumane conditions and low wages of much of the world’s manufacturing is the compulsion to maximize profits and share prices. Many companies that outsource their manufacturing to nations with lower wages could easily make a profit by keeping their manufacturing local. But the job of corporations is not to make a profit, it is to *maximize* profit. If a corporation is not maximizing its profit, it is defrauding its investors.

While the IMF and agreements like NAFTA employ language about working to develop the economies of low-GDP nations, the disingenuousness of such affirmations is quite legible to those being exploited. As a maquiladora employee in Mexico observes: “The multinationals like to say that they are contributing to development, but they come into our countries for one thing—cheap labor. If the labor stops being so cheap they can move on. So how can you call that development? It depends upon the people being poor and staying poor.”[38]

While the tools and forms may appear different, the exploitation of international workers in border zones continues the patterns set down by the Dutch East India Company. “Ever since the colonies, growth is fueled by exploiting people and environments elsewhere.”[39] Minority world (Global North) nations created “a border zone within which labor protection, health and safety, and environmental laws were essentially not enforced.”[40] Such conditions expose workers to high levels of toxic chemicals, causing high levels of children born with anencephaly near border factories.

It is important to remember that these workers are not made precarious simply by the negligence of larger corporations. Unsafe and toxic working conditions combined with poverty wages aren’t just the result of soulless indifferent penny-pinching. It is a deliberate strategy. The unending growth of wealth is impossible without systemically enforced indignity. Today precarious humans (those of ill-defined national or health status, those with unmeetable financial

obligations) have become lucrative commodities—it's lucrative to make people precarious. Just as much as TVs or microwaves, maquiladoras are manufacturing global precarity. The more precarious you are, the more exploitable you are.

In discussing the formalization of labor in India (i.e., "on the books" work), Laura Bear points to a correlation between formalization (e.g., the kind that comes with maquiladora work) and precariousness.[41] In large part, formalization simply means neoliberalization. Advocates of (neo)liberalism argue that, above all else, liberalism stands for freedom, individual freedom. It is about being liberated from the controls and oversight of governments and their regulators. The freedom to be exploited by multinational companies seems an odd form of freedom, but okay.

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The last few decades have seen the rise of a novel method of exploiting precarity in the form of "social impact bonds" (SIBs). Kish and Leroy discuss these financial instruments that transform marginalized and disempowered populations into investible securities. For example, Goldman Sachs has contracted with municipal governments in New York and Boston to "invest" in lowering youth prison recidivism rates. That is, Goldman Sachs bought a bond (which they created) from New York City for $10 million, on which they'll receive a 5 percent annual return if the conditions of the program are met (a 10 percent reduction in reincarceration). Goldman Sachs stands to profit $2.1 million dollars off this contract, money which is coming from public coffers.[42]

Other SIBs "invest" in lowering homelessness, teen pregnancy, or school truancy. SIBs are advertised as "shifting all risk to outside investors, who thereby 'earn' the financial rewards of risk-taking. By ostensibly taking on this risk, investors also generally assume a great deal of decision-making power over the design and implementation of the project, accelerating the business-fication of public services."[43] This financialization of social work is yet another means of extracting public (taxpayer) money by banks and for-profit

institutions. Everything must be made profitable in a society organized around perpetual economic growth, even economically "burdensome" occurrences like homelessness or teen shoplifting.

Financial institutions like Goldman Sachs construct these bonds in such a way that makes them almost entirely risk-free, guaranteeing annual returns regardless of the outcome of their program for reducing recidivism rates. These instruments are essentially mechanisms to extract perpetual interest payments from local governments. It is predatory lending to social services. Even notorious neoliberal champions like McKinsey & Company point out that because of the multilayered structure and "diverse actors each charging a fee or expecting a return" SIBs are more complicated and expensive than if governments simply operated programs out of their own budget.[44]

Occupy Wall Street

Since the 2008 financial collapse, a more widespread financial literacy has developed among the general population. This has included an expanded vocabulary (e.g., subprime mortgage, derivatives) and greater indignation at financial manipulations (e.g., the Occupy Wall Street movement). But how much has this literacy and indignation translated into change, justice, or emancipation? Has this literacy and indignation identified root causes and spurred policy alternatives? Much of the bipartisan angst and aggrievement so corrosive to today's politics can be traced to the unsatisfactory handling of the 2008 crisis. Perhaps it is of a different magnitude, but giving bailouts to the financial industry and not its victims is an affront similar to giving reparations to slaveowners instead of enslaved people.

Konings suggests that the prevailing critique of the crisis as irresponsible speculation has been dissatisfying and ineffective. Calls for regulating irresponsible speculation seem to be missing the point of how financial capitalism works. The exuberant or irrational or

malicious speculation is not the aberrant behavior. The production of contingency (not necessarily the production of profit) is the aim of speculative exchange. The financial system continuously produces new sources of contingency, which induces firms to integrate into larger and larger wealth aggregators.[45] Stock exchanges facilitate this aggregation and hierarchization process.

Finance is "a way to construct an unknown future. It is more interested in financialization than commodification, more taken with the promises and products of investment than the immediate utility of consumption."[46] This continues to echo the Medici imperative to construct *uncertain* futures to avoid the ban on *certain* profits. "Profits in derivative markets only derive from pricing volatility, they require a constant . . . supply of variance."[47] Chaos isn't an accident. It's the goal.

The idea that "what animates the market and defines its singularity is the production of unpredictable events and unhedgeable risks" builds on many notions put forth in Elie Ayache's *Blank Swan.*[48] Much of this work concerns the reality of possibility and probability, how these manifest in and are manifested by the stock market, as well as how possibility and probability (as understood through the market) impact prevailing notions of time. Ayache wonders "how we can relate to the future outside prediction."[49] Such questions challenge the reality of the future (discussed in chapter 6), a critical issue when considering the unending growth of wealth. Most provocatively, Ayache suggests probability "may just have to end!"[50] In place of probability and prediction, Ayache suggests the act of trading—that is, trading as "knowledge of the future" (as opposed to probability as knowledge of the future).

This idea of stock markets constructing the future echoes the concept hyperstition—a fiction that makes itself real.[51] Through writing, Ayache suggests, manifested actualities give birth to immaterial possibilities that border reality. The derivative instrument is particularly representative of this self-fulfilling capacity as it "represents the emergence of a self-expanding, self-valorizing money form," existing in a "dynamic of expansion-valorization."[52]

According to this line of thinking, possibilities never happen. “Possibility does not precede the real. The realization of possibility is not the selection of a particular possibility among a set of alternatives and the later addition of reality to it. . . . Reality takes place . . . and possibility is subsequently imagined. . . . True events create their own possibilities—the possibilities that will have led to them. Therefore, possible events are never realized. They are real and then they ‘become’ possible.”[53]

There is a disconnect between probability and predictability on one hand and reality and the future on the other. It is through the conjuring of future value in instruments like the derivative that capitalized peoples can elide the empirical impossibility of perpetual economic growth. A derivative can take many forms and can pertain to many commodities, but it essentially outlines the conditions of the future. A derivative may specify a future date, a future value, or a future action (buy or sell) that must contractually be taken. Derivatives legalize hypothetical future scenarios, and through this legality make the hypothetical real. “Derivatives abolish the limits to growth.”[54]

LiPuma suggests that the derivative weaves together the future and the present, “derivative markets are founded on the fabrication of knowledge.”[55] Or in other words: “The derivative embodies an interpolation of the forthcoming that attaches the future to the present . . . agents are condemned to anticipate a future they cannot know with any certainty, and so following the lead of economics they seek to scientize that future as a deterministic probability distribution.”[56]

This abstractness of the future makes it susceptible to deviations from probabilistic projection, such that “small market disturbances can trigger a systemic breakdown.”[57] Both the derivative and the Medici bill of exchange generate the same destabilizing effect that results from distorting temporality—replacing the present with the future. LiPuma characterizes how this chaos becomes lucrative: “hedge the risks created by duration while simultaneously capturing the profits engineered by volatility.”[58]

Normalizing Crisis

As the perpetual growth of wealth has become naturalized, so too have periodic crises come to be expected. The decadal collapses, recessions, and restructurings of global (or regional) economies could, at this point, safely be considered a regular operating byproduct of capitalization. If the past three hundred years are allowed to serve as a sufficient case study, then perfectly “normal” capitalized societies endure a severe economic shock about once a decade. Often these shocks are portrayed as malfunctions of the system, but it appears to be just how capitalism works, rather than a glitch.

In addition to the nineteenth-century crises mentioned above, Julian Hoppit identifies eighteenth-century English financial crises in 1701, 1710, 1715, 1720, 1726, 1745, 1761, 1763, 1772, 1778, 1788, 1793, and 1797.[59] The world wars of the first half of the twentieth century somewhat obscure the regularity of crises, but they were there. While some rightly point out that the wars served as powerful engines for economic growth, the wars themselves were certainly crises (I’d rather have a depression than a world war and holocaust). The wars could be framed as economic crises that expanded into military conflagration—military campaigns undertaken precisely to “solve” stagnating economic growth. Rather than the regular decadal crisis, the period between 1914 and 1945 was one long crisis anchored by the Great Depression. The “Roaring Twenties” obscured the ongoing crises with exuberant credit infusions (much like the 1990s). After the postwar boom years, the trend of periodic crises picked up again in the 1970s.

One may be tempted to look at long-term patterns of life expectancy or income per capita and say that despite the periodic crises, over the past two-hundred years, quality of life has improved across a wide-series of metrics, so perhaps these periodic upheavals are worth the cost (in the long run). Such rhetoric should be contested. Metrics of well-being are questionable both for their accuracy and universal applicability.

More saliently though, these crises, which may not hinder long-term economic expansion, are the fuel that foments the divisive antagonism upon which the modern economy depends. That is, crises induce both economic hardship and social disharmony. As discussed by many, crises often serve two purposes: 1) to consolidate wealth and 2) to institutionalize the fear, distrust, and hate needed to divide the marginalized and prevent organizing against the aristocracy.[60]

To the first of these points (consolidation), “working-class” wealth may accumulate for ten years or so. Prospects begin to look bright for this “middle-class.” Then, an economic crisis comes along and wipes out much of the past decade’s gains, and all that lost wealth is absorbed by banks or those owning long-term generational assets. In 2008, Barclays acquired much of the assets of Lehman Brothers, and JPMorgan Chase absorbed the failing Bear Stearns. More recently, in 2023, Chase swallowed the assets of the failing First Republic Bank. While crises may, at times, cause an individual bank to collapse, the overall result of the past three hundred years of crises has been to strengthen the power of banking, increasingly entangling banking with the mechanics of governance and legislation.

Financial institutions are not merely protected during crises but actually accumulate power and wealth through austerity policies that are inflicted upon the laboring classes. Though crises are caused by large-scale pursuits of private wealth, when crisis hits, the burdens and reparative efforts are handled by the public: the state, the people. Austerity policies affirm that the interests of the post-enclosure state are the same as those of the financial sector. We do not have bakeries or universities or sports teams that are too big to fail. The state isn’t organized around success in baking; it’s organized around success in banking. Austerity, most visibly in the wake of the 2008 crisis, is the process whereby a financial crisis is transformed into a civic crisis (government debt). That is, problems caused by the over-pursuit of profits by the rich are magically blamed on the welfare state and public sector.[61] The irresponsibility of the rich, via some public relations alchemy, metamorphizes into the

irresponsibility of the poor.

To the second point above (that crises are used to sow class hatred), crises are not accidents but rather opportunities to entrench the disempowerment of working classes.[62] Since the 2008 crisis, divisiveness has amplified significantly. The rise of Hitler could certainly be traced to divisive social unrest caused by economic crisis in Germany (the Deutschmark lost $4 trillion in value between 1922 and 1923). From Orbán in Hungary to Le Pen in France to Bolsonaro in Brazil, to Brexit and the MAGA movement in the US, it certainly seems as though totalitarian nationalism has risen percipitously in the wake of the dissatisfying response to the 2008 financial crisis.

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It is easy to say that economic crises are caused by the irresponsibility of bankers and investors, and that "the idea of lending became decoupled from the responsibility of behaving as a prudent lender."[63] How and why is irresponsibility pervasive and permitted in the financial sector? From the perspective of investors, behaviors which seem illogically irresponsible are quite rational within the internal logic of perpetually accelerating wealth accumulation. That is, if a broker's behavior ultimately increases the concentration of wealth, it would hardly seem irresponsible from the financial sector's perspective (which, again, is increasingly synonymous with the state's perspective). Konings highlights the mechanics of this process: "It is perfectly possible for banks to have incentives to invest in obligations they realize are unlikely to ever be repaid. In other words, a bank has overtly no substantiative goal, no purpose other than to effect a hierarchizing movement."[64]

Legislative policies are designed around the interests of wealth aggregation. Thus, the reason failures of large-scale investors cause society-wide distress is that this society is designed to facilitate the profits of investors. In such a society what is bad for investors usually ends up being bad for society. This isn't because investors are doing us a favor by making a lot of money, but rather because

the political infrastructure is designed to support wealth accumulators.

Many point out the inhumanity of sentiments like Gordon Gekko's "greed is good" (read: making lots of money is good for society), but we've organized our society in such a way that when rich people fail to grow their wealth it has negative repercussions for poor people.[65] The point of this book is to denaturalize this society. It is not a law of nature that makes "greed good" but a set of historically situated political contestations. Polities have developed over the past four hundred years to valorize the growth of wealth. It's not impossible to alter social organization, but it requires de-normalizing the idea that wealth must grow. We don't have to live in a world where the miscalculations of rich people cause poor people to starve.

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The Great Depression—the most visible crisis in the history of capitalism—offered an opportunity to (re)assess the globally dominant economic status quo. A key cause of the Great Depression (and preceding crises) was the impact of stock market speculation on the money supply. When the hypothetical world of stock valuation runs into the brick wall of tangible assets, crisis and chaos ensue. The weaving of the hypothetical into the actual can be incredibly lucrative. It allows fictional wealth to be used to grow actual wealth—a self-manifesting fiction.

The convergence of facts and fictions drives economic crises. "The differentiation between economic and imaginative writing—along with the concomitant differentiation between fact and fiction—[normalized] the peculiarities of the credit economy and the monetary instruments on which it depended."[66] Mary Poovey has documented thoroughly that finance is built on fictions. Adam Smith "insisted that, if he could describe the market as it ought to be, he would be able to help make the ideal real."[67] Smith had remarkable success in this endeavor.

One of the biggest fictions of the past two hundred years has been the existence of something called the middle class. The middle

class (or Poovey's "ordinary people") is a construction that validates mass exploitation and legitimizes the continued asymmetrical growth of wealth. The middle class is a truly twentieth-century artifact, existing roughly from 1945 to 2008. It is odd to hear political commentators speak of rebuilding the middle class as though it were some permanent fixture that's been broken. After crises occur, instead of realizing that the middle class is a deceptive fabrication, popular calls are made to restore the middle class, even among left-leaning figures like Michael Moore and Bernie Sanders. Rather than "fix" the middle class, perhaps "breaking" the upper class would be more effective.

The Great Depression produced significant legislative tinkering, notably the 1933 Glass-Steagall Act. Prior to the act, individual institutions could deal in securities, insurance, and banking, thus allowing the relatively seamless interplay of hypothetical and actual wealth. Glass-Steagall prohibited this interplay, prevented single institutions from doing business in these three sectors.

The lifespan of the Glass-Steagall Act saw the rise of middle-class pretension, the Bretton Woods agreement, the United States dropping of the gold standard, the end of the postwar boom, the rise of OPEC, and the hyper-liberalization of the Reagan-Thatcher regimes. The fall of the Soviet Union and subsequent '90s boom living combined to offer the illusion of a perfected economic system that no longer needed the restrictive Glass-Steagall Act. This confidence led to 1999's Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act, rescinding Glass-Steagall.

Given the financial tumult and dimness of economic prospects since Gramm-Leach-Bliley, some have accused the dismantlers of Glass-Steagall of hubris—thinking that they'd perfected the economy. This reading is too generous. Accusations of hubris or overconfidence make it sound like neoliberal architects didn't know their actions would cause harm to billions of people. This wasn't hubris but rather pre-meditated assault. Despite the twenty-first century economic malaise, corporate profits have continued to accelerate.

Particularly egregious (and further evincing the naturalization of

governance by banking) is that the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act was passed specifically to accommodate the new banking conglomerate CitiGroup. In 1998, CitiGroup illegally formed through a merger of CitiCorp and Travelers Insurance—a violation of the Glass-Steagall Act's prohibition on the merger of banks and insurance companies. CitiGroup was not punished for this violation. Rather, the government responded by giving the company "between two to five years to divest assets that violated Glass-Steagall" (dissolve either its insurance or banking operations). The Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act was passed during this period almost explicitly to avoid this divestment, allowing CitiGroup to retain its banking, investment, and insurance assets. To be clear, rather than punish CitiGroup for violating a law, the law was changed. Governance by banks loud and clear.[68]

Architects of the Gramm-Leach-Bliley world order have hastened to defend the act, arguing that the 2008 collapse was not the result of repealing Glass-Steagall.[69] They point out that the collapse was not caused by companies engaged in insurance, banking, and securities operations. These defenses are misleading. True, the larger portion of blame for the 2008 collapse belongs to investment houses like Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers or insurance giants like AIG, not institutions like CitiGroup. However, the reason these companies were dealing in dangerous and speculative financial instruments is because larger conglomerates like CitiGroup were increasingly pulling in a greater percentage of the "legitimate" surplus wealth.

Alternating Currencies

The "conventional money system . . . makes growth compulsory [and] automatically concentrates wealth" argues alternative currency advocate Bernard Lietaer.[70] As an indication of the deep reification of growth-based thinking, Lietaer adds, "If there is no growth, the money does not exist and everyone goes bankrupt. So, the compulsory growth is compulsory. It's not because we like growth

that we do it. We have no option."

As a vociferous advocate of breaking up the state monopolies over money and introducing competing and diverse currencies, Lietaer's inability to conceive something beyond the "conventional money system" is another indication of how normalized economic growth is today. Lietaer suggests that advocates for degrowth do not understand that growth is mandatory under the current regime. I would counter that degrowth advocates are well aware of this and they ultimately seek to change the current regime.

Over the past decades several alternative currency and exchange experiments have been launched around the world. These groups represent a wide range of ideologies, from hippie communes to tech financiers. The recent wave of alternative currency strategies, while heterogeneous, has roots in early-twentieth century experiments like the Wörgl (discussed in chapter 2). Beginning in the 1980s there began to emerge various regional currencies—Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS)—which took a variety of different forms.[71] "More than 1,000 LETS exist today, counting more than 50,000 members around the world."[72]

Perhaps today's most successful LETS is Bavaria's Chiemgauer. Launched in 2003, the currency is widely accepted in the hundred--kilometer radius around Lake Chiemsee, southeast of Munich and West of Salzburg. Many alternative currencies can be easier to earn than to spend. In research on the Ithaca HOUR, an alternative currency used in the town of Ithaca, NY, beginning in 1991 and fizzling out around 2015, some users complained they had nothing to spend them on, so they ended up buying superfluous gifts or knick-knacks—"not, perhaps, a model of sustainable consumption intended by the system's promoters."[73] Maurer expresses little enthusiasm for LETS currencies, "One reading . . . would argue that these contemporary alternatives are little more than ideological flourishes to dominant modes of capitalist production, circulation, and exchange."[74]

Over the past two decades, alternative currencies have been critiqued as hobby projects of the upper middle class. While they espouse an emancipatory rhetoric, at the end of the day, exchanging

in the Chiemgauer is a middle-class luxury infeasible for lower-income communities.[75] “There can, at bottom, be only one money in the world. There can, of course, be different currencies, but . . . they must be interchangeable . . . and thus communicate to become one, and only one, universal money system. Thus all communicating societies of exchange effect a functional unity.”[76]

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Cryptocurrencies have been the most visible alternative to sovereign currency for the past decade-plus. While ostensibly Bitcoin was developed to serve as money (with the three classic functions: store of value, unit of account, and medium of exchange), the largest holders of it appear to be using it as an investment product. Despite significant volatility, it has remained a high-performing asset (rising by about $100,000 from 2017 to 2025). While one can obviously invest in and trade sovereign currencies, a currency that isn’t moving isn’t a currency—it isn’t “current.” Rather than money, then, Bitcoin appears more like an algorithmic accumulating platform.

Julia Tourianski of the Mises Institute, a self-described “promoter of anti-state mentality . . . in a love-affair with private property” asserts that “Bitcoin is fundamentally humanitarian . . . The blockchain is free speech.”[77] It is curious to equate free speech with both finance and anonymity. Many advocates argue that Bitcoin facilitates the creation of “individual sovereigns”—precisely the aim of the Enclosure Movement.[78] To this end, Bitcoin seems like a new form of private property. In a weird way, we don’t privately own traditional state-backed cash. Paper money is a public resource. We share it and circulate it with others in our country. Bitcoin seems to promote the idea that we should “own” our own money. Like other forms of inequity though, the *New York Times* reports that 95 percent of Bitcoin is owned by just 4 percent of the market.

While some see Bitcoin as a potentially liberating alternative to the power and control of central banks, it appears to be another in a long line of innovations that alienates and disembeds value. Making Bitcoins is incredibly energy intensive; its value is pegged to how

much superfluous energy it consumes. Bitcoin mining has reshaped many civic energy infrastructures around the world. One can envision a dystopia where we no longer burn coal to light homes or charge iPhones but rather to keep the value of Bitcoin growing. Bitcoin is a form of value pegged to how much superfluous energy it consumes. GDP has been directly correlated with fossil fuel consumption since industrialization. Bitcoin bypasses superfluous production of commodities and just burns fossil fuels for no other reason than to increase value. What one owns when they own Bitcoin is a record of how much superfluous energy they consume.

Unending Compulsion

Goetzmann asserts, “Finance has vastly improved our species’ ability to reduce existential risks and to allocate resources through time to foster growth.”[79] Sure, finance greatly improved our species’ ability to grow wealth, but reduce existential risks? One could argue that existential risks didn’t truly exist until the normalization of finance. As illustrated in chapter 4, the notion of “risk” was invented by finance. Risk was invented to deceive. Many popular historians continue to fall for the ruse originally developed by financiers to deceive Renaissance ecclesiastic authorities.

The ruse falls apart when, instead of automatically valorizing economic growth, we frame it as a social ill. Instead of mainstream history being the sycophantic biography of European wealth accumulation, one might ask what Europe did wrong to so utterly fail at controlling the expansion of its wealth and how it so utterly failed to control its economic growth that it resorted to the colonial-slavery-ecocide complex. The short answer is that Europe developed a program of resource distribution (an economy) that can’t function without growth. Europe’s wealth, so ephemeral and abstract, crumbles (becomes worthless) if it sits still. The past five hundred years have seen the Eurowest violently force this economy on the rest of the world. The effort of this book is to show how this troubling

economy is built upon the mechanics of interest, insurance, and stock exchanging.

Embedding the brutality of this economy in financial instruments abstracts and disembodies the responsibility of resource distribution and exchange. Nobody willingly takes responsibility for the devastation wrought by accelerating economic growth; no one is responsible for mass starvation or the past five hundred years of human trafficking. If nobody is responsible for such violence, how do we stop it?

Such an undertaking is difficult given that many today identify with "the unending compulsive acquisition of money."[80] Capitalizing (accumulating wealth) is a large part of many people's identities today (exemplified among the "Wall Street types"). Capitalizing is baked into US American identity, "our common capitalism," more so than in Europe. The United States has never not been capitalized.[81]

The popular perception is that twenty-first-century citizens consume a lot. This is not untrue, but compared to pre-industrial eras we actually consume a far smaller percentage of our wealth. This is because we generate so much excess wealth. So what do we do with this wealth? Infrastructure improvements? Health care? Military campaigns? A little surplus wealth goes into these but not a significant percentage. Excess wealth is simply reinvested into growing itself. Social and private wealth is systematically redirected from provisioning and consumption to the further aggregation of wealth. We don't have money for free education because we use our money to make more money.

Rosa Luxemburg characterized this use of surplus wealth: "They use it for an ever greater expansion of their production. The capitalists are thus fanatical supporters of an expansion of production for production's sake. They see to it that ever more machines are built for the sake of building . . . ever more new machines. Yet the upshot of all this is . . . an increasing production of producer goods to no purpose whatever."[82]

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3 Edward LiPuma, *The Social Life of Financial Derivatives: Markets, Risk, and Time* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 37.

4 Robert Frank, "The wealthiest 10 percent of Americans own a record 89 percent of all US stocks," CNBC, October 18, 2021, https://www .cnbc.com/2021/10/18/the-wealthiest-10percent-of-americans-own-a -record-89percent-of-all-us-stocks.html

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6 Goetzmann, *Money*, 10.

7 Rob Nixon deploys a critique of this normalized sociopathy, pointing out that official definitions of "development" amount to cultures with less energy-intensive technology being replaced by cultures with more energy-intensive technology, basically equating "development" with genocide. Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 164.

8

Anastasia Bogatyreva notes that Portugal granted a stock company as early as 1293.
9 Poovey, *Genres*, 81.
10 Poovey, *Genres*, 81.
11 Poovey, *Genres*, 82.
12
Tanner, *Christianity*.
13 Addobbati, “Italy,” 68.
14 Marion Benz, *The Principle of Sharing. Segregation and Construction of Social Identities at the Transition from Foraging to Farming* (Berlin, Ex Oriente, 2010); Michael Schnegg, “Reciprocity on Demand,” *Human Nature* 26, no. 3 (2015): 313–30; Thomas Widlok, *Anthropology and the Economy of Sharing* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2016).
15 Jack Hirshleifer, “The Expanding Domain of Economics,” *American Economic Review* 75, no. 6 (1985): 58.
16 Azpilcueta, *On Exchange*, xxx.
17
Tanner, *Christianity*, 144.
18 William Deringer, “For What It’s Worth: Historical Financial Bubbles and the Boundaries of Economic Rationality,” *Isis* 106, no. 3 (2015): 647.
19
This is visible in the high-end art world, with artworks reaching into the hundreds of millions at auction.
20
Deringer, “For What It’s Worth.”
21 Poovey, *Genres*, 82.
22 Deringer, “For What It’s Worth,” 655.
23 Many have eloquently considered how the stock market is indeed a kind of knowledge or information filter. Ayache writes of the market *as* knowledge production (Elie Ayache,

The Blank Swan: The End of Probability [Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2010], 13–14).

24 LiPuma, *Social Life*, 110.

25 LiPuma, *Social Life*, 3.

26 Jeremy Rudd, "Why Do We Think That Inflation Expectations Matter for Inflation? (And Should We?)," *Finance and Economics Discussion Series* 62 (2021): 1–27.

27 Goetzmann, *Money*, 10.

28 LiPuma, *Social Life*, 66–68.

29 LiPuma, *Social Life*, 78 (evidenced by former presidential candidate Mitt Romney opposing the post-2008 bailout of the auto industry but supporting the bailout of the financial industry).

30 LiPuma, *Social Life*, 77–80.

31 LiPuma, *Social Life*, 343.

32 Iyer, "Corporate," 431.

33 Iyer, "Corporate," 438.

34 LiPuma, *Social Life*, 234.

35 LiPuma, *Social Life*, 72–73.

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Chapter Six: A Certain Unrest (The Future)

“As time passes capitalists acquire *infinitely increasing* amounts of capital.”[1] What kind of future has *infinite* amounts of capital? Infinity itself is an abstraction, thus infinite economic growth is an abstraction, conjecture, supposition; it is imaginary, pretend, make believe.[2] This chapter meets the abstraction on its own turf, offering imagined visions of how the past constructed this infinitely bountiful future. That is, I examine how “the future” evolved as a necessary implement to pursue economic growth. If wealth must grow, when does it grow? The future.

There is no shortage of eloquent analyses of how modern economic relations have altered conceptions of time.[3] This chapter, however, focuses on futurity as an othered timescape. This critique toys with Fredric Jameson’s oft-cited *bon mot* that it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.[4] Nearly any pop culture output that imagines the future confirms Jameson’s remark. There are volumes more science fiction that depicts the end of the world than the end of capitalism. Jameson’s proverb is so resonant that it almost feels like a premonition, a promise, a threat. Not only is it easier to *imagine*, the end of the world is *actually going to happen*. Whether from climate change, nuclear annihilation, or pandemic, the end of the world seems imminent.

“No future can be imagined that would be radically different from the present. The result is a kind of totalization of capitalism itself; no future exists outside present capitalist arrangements.”[5] So total is capitalism’s grip on temporal imaginaries that I would add to Jameson’s remark that it is harder to imagine a time before capitalism than the beginning of the world. This is evidenced by the

numerous archaeological and historical interpretations that retroject capitalized notions (e.g., individualistic competitiveness, labor, efficiency) onto populations thousands of years ago.

To bypass Jameson's threat, this chapter proceeds from the conceit that the world already ended. That is, rather than a future event, the end of the world was the seminal event necessary for today's prevailing social relations to emerge. In keeping with the durational scope of this book, the world probably ended sometime around 1350 CE. As the Black Death completed its sweep of Eurasia by ~1352 CE, killing nearly 200 million people globally (30–50 million in Europe)—about one-third of the population—the world came to its end. From the ashes of this ending, capitalized social relations arose. Capitalism isn't apocalyptic, it's post-apocalyptic. This amoral, irrational system of resource distribution we've pursued these past few centuries, from the Medici to Bitcoin, could only arise in the wake of a demolished world. Today's upside-down, inside-out world is the built-up detritus of the end of the world.

My procedure for this chapter is to investigate the evolution of the future, beginning at the end of the world (the Black Death). The future emerged from the dead world to offer an "Other-time" into which the survivors of the plague could project themselves. To change the present, we must first change the future. Economic relations today can't be reconceptualized unless we alter our economic expectations of tomorrow.

The perpetual growth of wealth requires the perpetual impoverishment of the *present*—both materially and imaginatively. A *future* of perpetual growth impoverishes the imagination (i.e., it imposes conceptual teleology) and material well-being (i.e., it shifts wealth from the present to the future). Countering much environmentalist rhetoric, we are not impoverishing the future for present benefit. Rather the opposite: we are ruining the present in the name of future profits.

Contrary to Ewald's understanding of insurance as "teaching people to have foresight, to turn themselves toward the future, preventing them from living only in the present," tools like insurance have foreclosed the ability to live in the present.[6] We are constantly

told that we cannot provide free health care, childcare, eldercare, or education because we would cripple future people with . . . debt. The ellipsis here is meant to point out the questionability of this reasoning. The concern for the fiscal well-being of future people is revealing. It suggests that the world's wealth is not for the living people that create it but for the hypothetical people of an imagined future time. The economic growth imperative has "closed down the possibilities and potentialities of time . . . cancelled the sensation of living with time."[7]

This misplaced concern with passing debt to future generations is a byproduct of the normalization of economic growth and indebtedness.[8] Sure, people will exist after this moment, but they won't live *in the future*. They will live in a present and will have their own future to construct (or deconstruct). Fear of debt is a rhetorical device that authorizes the use of existing wealth to invest in the production of future wealth. Resources that could be used in feeding the one billion malnourished inhabitants of the present are instead used to make more wealth. Most of the planet's money is currently being used to grow itself, as opposed to feed the one billion malnourished.[9] With normalized interest, the future demands and extracts the wealth of the present. We fork over trillions worth of cash and resources to the future, rendering this wealth useless in feeding and sheltering today's impoverished. The present needs to be liberated from the future.

Ana Teixeira Pinto suggests that not only is it easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, but also, for those in dominant economic standing vis-à-vis the future, "the end of the world is . . . preferable to the end of the privilege afforded by racial capitalism."[10] Why is the end of the world so easy to imagine? Why are the ends of colonialism, racism, and capitalism so difficult to conceive? Azpilicueta spoke of how "the diversity of time" determines value; that is, present values are largely influenced by the weight given to the future or past.[11] Perhaps, if we seek new values, a new time is needed.

The Plagued Future

By 1352, the Black Death had raced around the British Isles and circled back on Scandinavia and the Germanic states having originated in the Far East in the 1330s,[12] estimates suggest 30–50 percent of the human population may have died in just a couple decades. It's impossible to grasp such an event. But we should try. Those familiar with the Marvel Cinematic Universe will recall that leading bad guy Thanos sought to kill 50 percent of the universe's population. Well, that basically happened in the fourteenth century. When Thanos-level events strike, the world is considerably altered afterward. Meanings and values shift. What were believed to be true and indelible contours of reality might be reconsidered. While some might try to cling to the values that preceded the apocalypse, they would be kidding themselves.

In Europe, seismic shifts in the world order took place. A new world rose from Europe's Black Death. Economic and religious practices, art and culture—all were altered. There's no more fitting description of the period following 1350 than "post-apocalyptic." It was the end of a world. In this post-apocalyptic world, a future (and a history) began to grow out of the dying present. In today's dominant historical narrative, the world preceding the Renaissance was backward. From the Renaissance forward, Europe began righting its trajectory such that today we have accumulated more knowledge and wealth than all the empires before us combined. This chapter suggests the opposite, that we currently occupy the "backward" world and the "regular" world ended a few centuries ago.

Prior to the modern period, change and newness were seen as rather negative if not downright evil.[13] In the post-apocalyptic world, change was welcomed. It is this basic shift, from a world that disliked change to a world that embraced change, that enabled notions of "progress" to emerge. The plague was so horrendous that altered circumstances were quite welcome.

The dissatisfaction with the present and the pursuit of perpetual economic growth go hand in hand. The present became a time from

which to escape. “The future” was constructed as an Other-time, a non-present, a time unstained by presence. This legacy remains. Today we continue to build for a better future, not a better present. Our resources and efforts are usurped by the future. The present is depleted. This is modernity’s “future”—an effort to escape the present. “Modernity emerged out of spiritual unrest and disquiet: but might it not be said that modernity is a term for a certain unrest and disquiet.”[14]

Ironically, while this modernity is sustained by change, progress, and novelty, it abrasively forecloses alternatives to itself. *We cannot change into a world that doesn’t valorize change. Progress is great, but we can’t progress toward a world without progress*. Modernity is trapped by teleological blinders.[15] That is, it is difficult for those of us within modern history to appreciate alternative paths that could lead to alternative worlds.

Graeber and Wengrow note how, from the Mesolithic to today, other societies frequently alter their form, try new configurations of power, new social arrangements, new subsistence strategies (e.g., some groups may be hierarchical and sedentary in the winter but egalitarian and nomadic in the summer, monogamous in the fall and polygamous in the spring).[16] One of the most insidious myths we tell about the premodern world is that it was stodgy, “traditional,” set in its ways. Rather, it is today’s society that is rigid, unimaginative, and unplayful, despite our never-ending wave of mass-produced amusements. The imaginative capacity needed to actualize worlds otherwise seems beyond the capitalized subject. We have trouble actualizing worlds otherwise because we don’t inhabit the *actual* planet. Rather, we inhabit the abstracted hypothetical times and spaces of “the future.”

• • •

Counterintuitively, pre-Renaissance thinking was less constricted than today’s. Fifteenth-century “speculative theologians” like Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464) demonstrated a wider imaginative spectrum than later thinkers such as Galileo (1564–1642).[17] Nicholas

entertained possibilities that subsequent scholars would consider fanciful or unreal, drawing on theological, astrological, and mystical explanations that were both politically and imaginatively impermissible for Galileo. Nicholas's breadth of thought is often interpreted as being premodern, supernatural, or unscientific but could easily be described as less restricted. What is often called modern thinking is denoted by the reduction of possible explanations, the elimination of causal pluralism. While the "universe" has become much bigger since the scientific revolution (we know of billions of other galaxies now), "reality" has become much smaller—all the gods and monsters have been eradicated from reality. Nicholas's range of thought was so vast because he was not immersed in "progress."

"The rise of modern capitalism was accompanied by the emergence of a secular experience of time."[18] That is, Christianity is not progressive, thus it is incompatible with burgeoning ideas of futurity. Echoing the sentiment of many Scholastic theologians, Luxemburg affirms that "usury was an example of man's usurpation of time, a realm where divine law prevailed."[19] The cumulative history of humans became a narrative unknown to God.

The Medicis came to prominence in this milieu that viewed the future as offering relief from the present. The future was new. Progress was "discovered" in the Renaissance and reinforced in part by aesthetic movements (e.g., linear perspective's construction of spatio-temporal horizons). Prior to the Renaissance, the future (or more properly, "the subsequent") didn't promise novelty.

In the immediate post-apocalypse of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the prevailing idea of the future was that it would look more like the past—pre–Black Death. "The future simply imposes itself, albeit in the shape of the past."[20] The Medici operated in a shaken-up time that was in need of resettling (like a snow globe). The Medici accumulation of wealth was premised, however, on perpetuating the unsettled, unknown, and unknowable future; taking advantage of the flux. In order not to be profiting from *certain* gain, "the future" needed to be reinvented as a never-ending story.

This contrasts the pre-apocalyptic view of subsequent time, in

which, “The present was not understood as a bridge between past and future, as having emerged out of a historical past and generating a contingent future.”[21] The Medici are often credited with inventing (or at least popularizing) double-entry bookkeeping—those ledgers that balance out credits and debits so clinically. This bookkeeping contributed to the rendering of hypothetical time as real, “as if the future has already arrived.”[22]

Victims of the Future

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, among the more cosmopolitan and powerful wealth holders, the idea of a future of flux had begun to naturalize, leading to speculation on the future’s form. This pursuit underwrote the first joint-stock investment opportunities in trading outfits like the East India companies. This era also saw speculative fevers surrounding various commodities. The tulips and the South Sea Company discussed in chapter 5 exemplify this speculative frenzy.

The publicly traded Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, or VOC) served as a template for many subsequent corporations. Just as the US today derives international political power from the influence of Goldman Sachs or CitiGroup, the Dutch gained power through the East India Company. As it became politically imperative for the company’s wealth to grow, the line between the state and the East India Company grew quite fuzzy (e.g., the company playing a crucial role in Dutch independence from Spain in the seventeenth century). Similar fuzziness blurs the line between Goldman Sachs and the state today.[23]

While the VOC did not invent maritime colonial violence, it did represent one of the most widespread and savage iterations of commercial brutality. It is affirming that most people today (even those sympathetic to the lure of perpetual economic growth) condemn the colonial violence perpetrated by the VOC. However, it is disappointing how many fail to see that large multinational

corporations are still doing the same thing. There's a tendency to assume that we know better today and that corporations don't knowingly pursue the violent domination of markets as happened in the freewheeling early days of capitalism. We see the images of exploitative factories in the nineteenth century and read the accounts of colonial terrors, but it doesn't register that this never stopped happening. It's not as though there was some armistice signed in 1919 where corporations consented to abstain from fatally exploitative business practices.

Global corporations still kill people, and not just with the slow violence of contaminated water and soil but also by quicker means like assassination. Most notable have been the murders of politicians, activists, and journalists throughout Latin America. High-profile murders have been perpetuated by the energy, mining, and logging sectors.[24] Vale (a $54 billion/year Brazilian mining company) killed about three hundred people from 2015 to 2019.[25] BP killed eleven people in their 2010 Gulf of Mexico spill.[26]

You'd think these organizations should have to stop existing after committing such atrocities. You'd think companies that are caught killing in order to grow profits should be shut down. That this doesn't happen is tacit verification that murder is permissible if it occurs in the pursuit of corporate wealth accumulation. Impeding profit maximization through investigative reporting or activism is so heinous an offense that you can be murdered for it extrajudicially. Impeding wealth accumulation is a more egregious transgression than homicide. These are the conclusions one must draw from the perpetuation of corporate violence.

• • •

Such violence is a measure of how valuable the future has become. The VOC era marked a transition in futurity from the Medici era. While the Medici future was framed as promising relief from the present, the VOC future was a gamble. Time became a game of chance one could bet on. That is, from the Black Death apocalypse to the seventeenth century, a notion of the future developed that

promised relief from the upheaval of pandemic and Reformation. The future offered a return to the stability of the pre-plague world. By the 1600s, however, this idea of the future as a return to stability had mutated into the idea of the future as unpredictable but predictable.[27]

This shift in the future's connotation was a result of the production of risk and the cultivation of uncertainty (predominately by banking outfits to avoid ecclesiastic restrictions on usury). The future had become a gamble, as evidenced by the widespread rise in popularity of games of chance and lotteries. Gerolamo Cardano was a trailblazer in this effort to discern from gambling a new way of knowing. Cardano, "perhaps the only probabilist with much hands-on gambling experience, had long before warned, probability mathematics does not eliminate the uncertainty of play."[28]

The rising popularity of "risk" as a new way of thinking about the world gave us Blaise Pascal's famous wager. Pascal's wager asks, without any way of definitively verifying the existence of God, what is the most rational way to behave and conduct oneself? Pascal concludes it's better to wager in favor of the existence of God. The dangers of wagering against are much worse than the sacrifices that come with wagering that God exists.

Tellingly, Pascal (a very pious man) framed this thought experiment in the form of a wager. This speaks to the popularity of gambling in his time. People were thinking through gambling. People were thinking through future chances in a manner they weren't prior to the Black Death or during the rise of the Medici. Gambling and games of chance are, of course, condemned in the Abrahamic tradition. Thus, it is odd to imagine what God might think of their existence being the subject of a wager, but Pascal embraces uncertainty and unknowability as vehicles for morality and faith. Pascal's "fertile uncertainty releases from within us a prodigious moral force."[29] Conversely, the Cartesian tradition attempts to tame, suppress, or eradicate uncertainty through reason.

Today we live in Descartes's world, not Pascal's. Today's dominant paradigm of thinking chose (or was compelled to take) a Cartesian trajectory. Descartes was an egotistical thinker, who

placed human reason above the natural world. For Descartes, thinking is famously a pursuit of ego—*I think therefore I am*. He and Pascal could not be more opposed. Pascal believed, “It is the heart that experiences God, and not reason.”[30] We are aboard the Cartesian trajectory now because it was more amenable to the abandonment of morality.

It’s fitting that Pascal posed this wager to the world at a moment when his society was on the cusp of taking such a gamble on the existence of God. Thinking about the outcomes of Pascal’s wager, the past four centuries look exactly as one would expect if EuroChristian society wagered against the existence of God. This has allowed us to attain “ungodly” material wealth. Eurowestern Christians from the seventeenth century forward have repeatedly indulged material gain (self-interest) over piety (neighborly obligation).

It may be easy for modern atheists to say “Yeah, we wagered against the existence of God, *and we were right*, God doesn’t exist.” However, this is precisely why Pascal’s wager is more substantial than it might first appear. Within the parameters of the thought experiment, it is impossible to ever know if one has made the right or wrong choice—you never get the answer. The wager is about how to best handle absolute uncertainty. Taking God out of the equation, is it more rational to behave in a selfless manner that may or may not be rewarded, or is it more rational to behave in a self-interested manner that may or may not be punished? Given that regardless of the unknowable outcomes, one course of action might benefit others and the other course might harm others, the choice is clear for Pascal. The Eurowestern world made a different choice—to behave in a self-interested manner.

What distinguishes Pascal’s wager is that, as was the dominant way of thinking about the future in his time, it required a choice. It required the agent to take a gamble, to choose between equally unknowable possibilities. In the following era this choice between an array of futures will be abandoned and, utilizing the tools of probability and physics (tools that Pascal helped develop), the future became a statistical degree of certitude.

Banking on the Future

The new future was built in England, which began its two-century domination of the future with its Glorious Revolution and the kindred emergence of Lloyds of London (LOL) in 1686 and the Bank of England (BOE) in 1694. Under the financial paradigm ushered in by the Bank of England, the future shifted from a gamble to a probability. This new future was the output of an equation, of probabilistic reasoning. This future was calculable. And with its parliamentary government in place, England's future was no longer subject to the capricious whims of an absolute monarch but instead to the studied calculations of a representative body.

While critiques of algorithmic governance have gained prominence in the past decades, decision-making based on calculable output had emerged by the eighteenth century (if not earlier).[31] It was calculus, combined with statistics and probability, as well as nascent forms of binary programming (from Jacquard's loom to Babbage's Analytic Engine) that fashioned the future of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The empowered sought to take the risk out of the future via mechanical and mathematical means—to make the future more real. "The calculations of long-run probabilities and consequences . . . *presupposed a future that exists*. . . . Whatever we mean by modernity is in some way linked with new attitudes toward the control of the future and the possibility of a life relatively secure from the disruptions of chance."[32]

From the preceding era of the VOC where the future was a gamble, it was now becoming a deterministic machine. The BOE and LOL essentially crafted and owned this automatic future. "Banks occupy a privileged position in the production and distribution of secular temporality. . . . Banks command a power to make available time."[33] Banks became the guarantors of the mechanized, automated future. Konings captures this rising sentiment, "We must protect the banks, the promise of the future that they hold."[34]

This era creates a "futurity premised on the expectation of

perpetual economic growth."[35] Economic growth became obligatory and expected. The mainstreaming of banks means the future demands more money than the present. "Capitalism depends upon the belief in and expectation of growth: 'Borrowers will have more money in the future to pay back the loans only if there is a likelihood of economic growth.'"[36] Perpetually growing wealth became naturalized. "The market must . . . be continually extended, so that . . . the conditions regulating them assume more and more the form of a natural law."[37]

In the second half of the seventeenth century, and increasingly through the nineteenth, science (as we know it) attained eminence as the privileged method of knowledge production. This was largely due to the economic utility offered by the study of dynamics. Newtonian differential equations are the math of temporality, of the future, of the subsequent. Differential equations describe how systems in motion will unfold into subsequence—a trajectory. Calculating the rules of trajectory became possible with dynamics. Differential equations mathematize time. If you insert the right numbers in the right order into an equation, you can output the subsequent. This is the deterministic universe suggested by Pierre-Simon Laplace's "demon" in 1814. This hypothetical creature, if given all the information in the universe regarding the position and motion of every particle today, could accurately output the precise motion of all these particles for the duration of the universe. This demon has been proven mythical through quantum mechanics. No such determinism is possible.

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The most significant political events in the Eurowestern sphere during this period were the political revolutions of the United States, France, and Haiti. These revolutions and their relation to the future illustrate the trajectory of naturalized economic growth. The word "revolution" itself has peculiar temporal undertones. Just as *risk* offered a new way of thinking for those of Pascal's era, "revolution" suggested a new paradigm of thought for the BOE and LOL era. The

BOE itself grew out of the Glorious Revolution, the 1688 usurpation of James II's crown by elite English and Dutch financiers with the stated agenda of accelerating British economic growth.[38]

Just as gambles are intrinsically considerations of the future, so too are revolutions—they suggest a subsequent, they suggest a change of the current state. "Revolution" is a fitting concept for the machine future. While the Glorious Revolution preceded the steam engine with its cycles of heat intake and depletion, revolutions were already critical to economic thinking by the late seventeenth century through the waterwheel. The turning (revolutions) of cogs and wheels was already powering England's industrial output.[39]

While the rhetoric behind the era's political revolutions is often remembered romantically, a revolution (in its "original" meaning) is quite unromantic, determined. It suggests a programmed or expected recurrence. Revolutions (in the mechanical sense, not the political) are very predictable, almost the epitome of predictability. In this world of mechanically revolving wheels "one does not expect the future to be like the present, but one expects the future to be no different from present anticipations of it."[40] In addition to the rotation of the turbine, revolutions were also gaining consciousness via the orbits of the planets. Newton's *Principia* came out one year before the Glorious Revolution. Of course, in much of the popular imagination, "revolution" (in the political sense) has come to mean a break or rupture from what came before—a whole new world—almost the opposite of the word's traditional meaning.

With the revolution as a vein of political thought, political creativity has been constricted to (re)cycling. It is difficult to think outside the revolution as a means of attaining systemic change. Prior to colonization, however, systemic change was a built-in component of most political systems worldwide. Today the planet is almost entirely locked into a single form of political organization—the capitalized nation-state—which (violently) forecloses alterity.

The Futurist Future

No one saw it coming. It was a sneak attack. The scatter artists tried to usurp the paradigm. It failed miserably. And worst of all, no one remembered it or why it happened. The future of the twentieth century was the bloodiest yet. The capitalist optimism of Adam Smith or David Ricardo proved naive. Accumulators unleashed permanent war in the twentieth century to enforce future profits. Violence proved necessary to secure the perpetual accelerating growth of wealth because the logic and reason that was used to justify exploitative colonial-capitalism was exposed as fraudulent and defective. By the beginning of the twentieth century, breakthroughs in science, art, philosophy, and literature unmasked the indelible flaws in capitalized reasoning. The flawed ideology of teleological, determinist, colonial, enlightened secularism was revealed as a sham for all to see.

Ironically, the indeterminacy of particle velocity within the pistons of steam engines ultimately broke down colonial-capitalist logic. At the most fundamental level, the world cannot be controlled and predicted. The machine upon which global domination was built (the steam engine) operated on the indeterminant motion of heated water molecules. The impossibility of predicting where any single particle will be at a given moment in the engine crumbled the Newtonian era of predictability. The work of Maxwell, Boltzmann, Planck, Einstein, Heisenberg, and Bohr revealed a new way of thinking the future. As opposed to the previous automated machine era, where the future was the output of equations, by the beginning of the twentieth century the future had become relative (as in relativity). That is, the future could take on different forms depending on the perspective and point of view of the observer.

Concurrent with the insights coming from physics were those in the visual arts, from William Turner to impressionism and culminating with the Futurists, Cubists, and Vorticists. Likewise, the thought of Bergson and Poincaré, as well as the literature of Proust, Woolf, and Joyce all contributed to the creation of anti-teleological (thus anti-accumulationist) rationality. Equally important was the introduction of (cultural) relativism into social theory by anthropologists like Franz Boas. This movement helped dent the ethnocentric hierarchization of societies, particularly dispelling the teleological notion that all forms

of social grouping would, if successful, inexorably drift nearer to the pinnacle of civilization (which happened to be Europe).

While many have commented on the temporal implications of Einstein's relativity and Cubist aesthetic trends, reframing such movements in science and art as epistemic challenges to capitalism that required two world wars to thwart helps to de-normalize the bloodshed of the twentieth century. That is, from roughly 1914 to 1945, war was waged to preserve a colonial-capitalist logic of endless linear progress and accumulation against the logic of avant-garde science, art, and philosophy. This avant-garde thinking showed that the reasoning that powered the Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution was inadequate or incorrect. This period of warfare marks the only real challenge capitalism has endured, but it didn't come from any nation or political party. The challenge came from scientists, artists, and philosophers pushing the received boundaries of thought beyond the narrow trajectory of Eurocapitalist rationality. Over 100 million people were killed in this warfare to sufficiently defang the radicality of relativity and of *Finnegans Wake*.

After 1945, the emancipatory epistemic pluralism offered by quantum indeterminacy and the era's abstract art movements had been neutralized and swallowed up by capitalist logic. The scientists' investigations were redirected into atomic bombs and energy exploitation. The artists' explorations were redirected into propaganda, marketing, and public relations.

The Italian Futurists serve as a compelling centerpiece. Famously, F. T. Marinetti, the movement's figurehead, fell in with Mussolini's fascism after World War I, but Futurist rhetoric from 1909 to 1914 was more nuanced, challenging the order of the world. The future of the Futurists was detached from the past. It was not indebted to the sequential cause and effect upon which the deterministic calculable future of industrialization relied. Futurist art championed simultaneity—the convergence of multiple times and perspectives into one moment. Such temporal heterodoxy challenged the economic reasoning of Adam Smith and his adherents.

By 1914, the artists of Europe had begun to undermine and corrode the linear perspective rationality that had dominated reality

since the Renaissance, and to corrode the idea that time was cumulative and society existed within a history with a past and future. Just as the omni-dimensionality of Cubism assaulted linear perspective, the relativism and quantum leaping of Einstein and Planck challenged Newtonian dynamical rationality.

With the dominance of capitalist epistemology under attack from the world's leading knowledge makers—artists and scientists—those who had dedicated their lives to the growth of wealth had to defend the future (where all their profits go). This burgeoning challenge to the logic of capitalized growth had to be subdued. It was beginning to gain allies within the working classes and political dissidents. People were beginning to realize that the logic of Descartes and Adam Smith and Benjamin Franklin didn't make any sense. The avant-garde was getting a bit brash, with the Futurists outright begging for war and the anarchists taking down the Archduke.[41]

The wars were undertaken to suppress the epistemic schizophrenia uncorked by the avant-garde. This heterodox reading of the wars frames them as battles over the legitimacy of perpetual economic growth, the legitimacy of capitalist rationality. In this interpretation the Axis and Allied nations fought on the same side. The belligerents were the nation-states pitted against those creating and propagating non-capitalizable notions of causality, beauty, virtue, value, reverence, dynamics, and interpersonal relationships. In this reading the world wars were a contest over how to operationalize knowledge.[42] While this is not the *only* way to read the twentieth-century wars, and I don't purport that the conscious motive of Hitler or Stalin or Eisenhower was to defeat Cubism, I submit this reading in the spirit of a literary critique.

On one side of this confrontation was the nation-state structure that had vested interest in perpetuating what economic anthropologist Edward LiPuma calls the "epistemology of capital."[43] On the other side of the confrontation was the avant-garde fighting on behalf of epistemic justice and ontological pluralism.[44]

The war machine (Axis and Allied forces) did what it does: expended great energy to authorize itself. It didn't lose. The vanquished were the sprouting alternative ideas that challenged the

legitimacy of this apparatus of domination and exploitation. The fight was no contest. The avant-garde didn't have any weapons or money to speak of. Yet the economic rationalists had to keep fighting among themselves because they are economic rationalists and excessive production and destruction (overkill) is a key tenet of capitalist epistemology.

The first war did not totally erase the thirst for epistemic plurality. It successfully ended the prevailing avant-garde movements of 1914 and their champions, but in the 1920s anti-capitalist rationality flared up even stronger with Dada, surrealism, *Ulysses*, and the uncertainty and indeterminacy of Heisenberg and Bohr. Thus, a second war was needed, more brutal and devastating than the first. The depravity of the second war would surely crush anyone not committed to the brutal logic of perpetual economic growth.

The strategy of the economic rationalists representing entities like the United States, France, Germany, Russia, Great Britain, Italy, and Japan was not simply to kill the alter-rationalists. Rather than attempt to erase non-capitalizable epistemologies, the winning strategy was to domesticate them, incorporate them into capitalism. The artists and the scientists practicing alter-economic thinking were forced into the ontology of capitalism. Even communism was incorporated into capitalism. This domesticating process culminated in the 1964 New York World's Fair, *Peace Through Understanding* (a petting zoo for the neutered spawn of art and science). The domesticating continued through abstract expressionism, Andy Warhol, nuclear power plants, and high-energy supercollider science. This is not to say these capitalized endeavors are not compelling, innovative, or worthwhile. They are all this, but they are also harmless. "Rent is poetry, science, art and religion capitalized."[45]

While Warhol ingeniously broadcast this precise decapitation of the avant-garde in his work, and the writings of scholars like Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Sylvia Wynter, Guy Debord, and Donna Haraway have sufficiently diagnosed the maladies of the era's future, there has been no sustained widespread attack on the growth of wealth since the end of the wars in Europe. The postmodernism and post-structuralism of the mid-century promoted the notion of the

world as a text open to endless interpretation, unending personalization, a world where personal freedoms superseded collective resistance.

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In attempting to explain the unprofitable years between the lucrative wars—the Great Depression—Keynes wrote, “improvement in the standard of life has been a little too quick”—surely one of the cruelest jokes a rich person ever told.[46] Neglected here is the fact that militarization is indispensable to capital (as is racism).[47]

The world wars were incredibly lucrative. Affirming Schumpeter’s creative destruction, (West) Germany and Japan, the two most destroyed nations, the two nations that indisputably “lost” the war, rebounded into economic juggernauts, becoming the two most productive economies outside the US in the second half of the twentieth century. The price of “losing” the war was abject capitalism—a stiff but lucrative punishment. The thirty years following the wars saw the greatest explosion of uninterrupted economic growth the Eurowest has ever experienced. “Clearly, something fundamental changed in world capitalism after the Second World War.”[48] The winner of the bloodbath that opened the twentieth century was capitalism.

The Cold War between privatized corporate capitalism (the Eurowest) and totalitarian state capitalism (the communist sphere) reified the idea that the whole point of a society (a nation, a government) was now to grow the economy. The West’s ability to grow its wealth faster and greater than the Soviets was used as evidence that state authority over industry was an incorrect way to organize a society’s resources.

Backs to the Future

As the illusion of communism was on the verge of crumbling in the 1980s, the movie *Back to the Future* (1985) and its sequel (1989)

were released, inaugurating a new era of futurity.[49] These were certainly not the first time-travel narratives, but they are significant for their depiction of for-profit incursions into the past (particularly the sequel). While time-travel narratives often consist of efforts to go back in time and make changes, such actions are usually framed as altering the time traveler's present, as opposed to the future exploiting the past. Since the Reagan-Thatcher hyper-neoliberalization of the 1980s, this is precisely how today's future works—by exploiting its past (our present).

The future is no longer relativistically dynamic as it was at the 1964 World's Fair. Rather, the future is now simply present. The future has invaded and is occupying the present, exploiting our resources for the construction of future profits. Citizens of the present no longer have autonomy over how to distribute or exchange resources; it is now dictated by the future. Whereas the future used to be a gamble you could bet on or an output you could calculate, the future now occupies the present. Today's economy has deprived the world "of the future, that is, of time as decision-making, choice, and possibility."[50]

The *Back to the Future* movies play with the grandfather paradox, but, instead of killing his grandpa, the protagonist, Marty McFly, prevents his mom and dad from falling in love, throwing his own existence into jeopardy. The *Back to the Future* movies are usually read through the perspective of 1985's Marty McFly, thus the first film goes thirty years into the "past" (1955) and the second film goes thirty years into the "future" (2015). However, shifting perspectives to the movies' 1955 allows us to better appreciate how today's futurity works. That is, the films' 1955 citizens are—much like all citizens of today's present—being repeatedly manipulated by the future.

The films accurately identify how Reagan and his neoliberal cohort unleashed the future to colonize the present. Reagan, the president in the present of the films, pops in and out of both movies. In 1955, Marty is ridiculed for claiming that the actor Ronald Reagan has become president. In 2015, a video image of Reagan appears in an "'80s"-themed café.[51] As one of the great heroes of perpetually accelerating economic growth and primary culprits in surrendering

the present to the future, this is a fitting homage.

Particularly liberated during the Reagan-Thatcher years was the financial sector, commandeering all economic activity for purposes of enriching the future. Shares (future profits) became more valuable than (present) profits. Under this finance capitalism, “present value is completely determined by expectations of future value; present value just *is* the discounted future. On the other hand, what future value will be is determined by and collapses into present expectation . . . present expectation becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.”[52]

Adkins further articulates the temporality of hyperfinance: “Profits are yielded from . . . future events which have not yet arrived and even past events which have not yet taken place—far from moving forward from a fixed point in the present towards probable futures. . . . In the time of securitized debt . . . profit lies in the non-chronological and indeterminate movements of speculative time.” Adkins goes on, “The promise to pay not only ties the indebted to futures which are not—and may never be—their own, it also renders the present beholden to those pre-processed and pre-set futures.”[53]

In order to maximize the wealth accumulated by the future, public assistance has been gutted. Nearly all checks on unbridled economic growth have been dissolved since Reaganites sold the government to the financial industry. Efforts toward worker empowerment have been undone. The federal minimum wage seems permanently set to sub-poverty levels. What Zuboff calls surveillance capitalism—where citizens are constantly monitored to monetize their actions—has become pervasive.[54]

Fixing this situation would require taking government back from finance, making the government beholden to public money as opposed to private. The answer is not further deregulation because we don’t trust the regulators. Rather, the answer is to make better regulators. Many are pessimistic about the possibility of salvaging politics to check financial power—“Politics is the archaic and inadequate name for something that must pass away into the religious history of capital.”[55] Such fatalistic views express a probably not uncommon desire: the total usurpation of politics by capitalism. Perhaps it is naive to think this hasn’t happened already. If it has,

how can politics be liberated from omnicidal economic growth?

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A distinctive feature of today's *Back to the Future* future is that it coexists with the present, in the present. For the preceding eras discussed above, one of the defining features of "the future" has been that it is something that (by definition) doesn't exist *now*. That is, the future, whatever it is, is supposed to be an othered time. The whole reason the future was invented was to have a conceptual alter-time upon which to project prevailing sentiments. Now the future makes incursions into the present. For example, when Chevron decided to undertake a hundred-year gas extraction project off the coast of Australia in 1972, this was an incursion from the year 2072.

When the future invades the present, it is to steal our resources for its own purposes—to bring itself into existence. "What appears to humanity as . . . capitalism is an invasion from the future by an artificial intelligent space that must assemble itself entirely from its enemy's resources."[56] This perversion manifested a string of "the-world-is-not-what-it-seems" movies in the late 1990s (*The Matrix*, *Dark City*, *The Thirteenth Floor*, *The Truman Show*, *eXistenZ*). Colebrook writes, "The present is not simply oriented to its own ongoing existence, but has already been captivated by a future in which humanity ceases to be."[57] Coleman affirms, "The future is brought into the present so that the possibilities of the future come to determine the present."[58]

Goetzmann is spot on in arguing that financial instruments move money into the future.[59] He further speaks of how the threat of limits to growth could cause a "breakdown between present and future economic value."[60] The well-being of the present demands such a break. Goetzmann emphasizes the power of finance-wielding actors in the present but misses the point. These transactions suck wealth out of the present. Ayache examines this phenomenon: "The market is the incredible medium in which the movement between present and future in reality can take place."[61]

The doom of this oppression from the future has begun to be articulated. “This is a timescape that, whatever our ethical mediation of it, generates inequality.”[62] Just as interest was rejected in the thirteenth century as “an enemy of the present,” it is crucial to recognize today that the future is the enemy of the present.[63] There has been a persistent lie throughout the history of capitalism that implores us to look forward to a brighter future. This propaganda from the future suckers us in the present into self-impoverishment to the benefit of wealth aggregators (entities like banks capable of funneling money to the future).

The End of the Future

Recapping the evolution of the future following the apocalyptic Black Death: the future was first constructed as a time when chaos would subside and there would be a return to normal; this gave way to an era in which the future was a gamble, subsequent time as something to be speculated upon; this was followed by a construction of the future as machine—the predictable output of equations and mechanics; this was followed by a future that was relative, simultaneous, and dynamic—like a Cubist painting; finally the future is now an occupying force—it coexists with the present in an extractive relationship. This section briefly explores what’s next for the future. How can today’s present throw off the shackles of the future?

Since the hegemony of capitalized social relations—the convergence of interest, insurance, and investment—the future must always have more wealth than the present. This suggests we must rethink platitudes about “building a better future” or saving the future for hypothetical children. Arresting economic growth halts the compulsory exploitation of the planet’s flora and fauna. Rather than Greta Thunberg’s valiant “Fridays for the Future” protests, perhaps Lee Edelman’s provocation would be a more useful tagline for averting the direst climate crises: “The future stops here.”[64] Stopping

capitalism requires stopping the future. Without a future, wealth cannot grow.

As the twentieth-century wars proved, you cannot erase militarized knowledge. The guns protecting capitalism's bad ideas are too powerful. The knowledge that authorized the perpetual accumulation of wealth was shown to be faulty and deceptive by the new and improved quantum-Cubist knowledge. Those who champion degrowth or highlight the contradictions of capital cannot succeed by pointing out the faulty logic of the dominant system.[65] Capitalized knowledge has put counter-epistemology to work for its own ends (the commodification of the planet). Instead, wealth must be made to work against itself. The logic of accumulation must be made to disperse and dissolve, rather than aggregate. Rather than a Reformation, we need a *Deformation*—a mutinous de-aggregation of parts in the wrong places. Wealth must be revealed as monstrous. Wholes must become parts. Or, more tangibly, pluralistic local thought is needed.

Along these lines, the 2015 Xenofeminist Manifesto, composed by a collective of artists and philosophers, suggests that the articulation of more and more types of rationality could render the ecocidal and genocidal rationality of capital insignificant or marginal.[66] They don't fight "reason" but rather seek to pluralize it. Rationality is not the exclusive domain of thinkers like Descartes or Milton Friedman. Xenofeminism promotes a non-retrogressive, technophilic, decentralized alter-rationality that usurps data, surveillance, algorithms, networks, and silicon from wealth aggregators. One means of accomplishing this may be through rematerializing the abstractions of capital. If perpetual growth is made possible by the abstraction of the material world via financial tools like derivatives, then rematerializing the abstractions of capital could impede the ability to infinitely grow wealth.[67] In the "pure reason" outlined by Immanuel Kant, it's possible to pursue forever growth. Pure reason needs to be materialized. Superfluous appendages need to be glued onto pure reason. Reason needs to be impurified with specks of dirt and dust.

Today the abstraction of the material world is commonly

accomplished through quantification and mathematization. Numbers are amenable to models, forecasts, and projections. “Models drive a reality that drives models ad infinitum.”[68] David Graeber speaks of “money’s capacity to turn morality into a matter of impersonal arithmetic . . . to justify things that would otherwise seem outrageous or obscene. . . . The violence and the quantification are intimately linked . . . violence . . . turns human relations into mathematics.”[69] Can these numbers be broken by the materials they purport to count?

Gorz’s economic reason aligns with these laments: “The tangible substance of the world has been abolished. . . . This is the ultimate, the absolute triumph of what Husserl defined as the ‘mathematized nature’: reality as we perceive it has been stripped of all its tangible qualities. . . . Work has disappeared because life has withdrawn from the universe. There is no one left; only numbers silently chasing numbers, numbers which cannot be questioned because they are insensible and mute . . . only mathematical properties are held to be ‘real’. . . . Only what can be calculated, quantified and expressed in figures is ‘real’. Everything else has only a ‘subjective’ existence.”[70] If thought had more heft to it, thought would be less invisible, it would be harder to ignore thinking.

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The pursuit of perpetual economic growth (and its asymmetry) is problematic. It foments social antagonism and environmental suicide. Why pursue a behavior and perpetuate a belief that is not only violently corrosive but also utterly incompatible with empirical experience? Economic philosopher Nina Boy discusses a shift in fictional writing as a genre. Prior to the rise of the novel, the plausibility of a fiction was based on its moral content, and truth or falsehood was decided by the narrative’s morality. By the 1800s, however, the novel grounded plausibility upon internal consistency of character, allowing readers to speculate on future actions based on past behaviors.[71] This reconceiving of reality as a trajectory of cause and effect rather than a moral landscape reflects the larger social

transformations that occurred leading to the naturalization of economic growth. “As money was becoming more fictional, fiction was becoming . . . more realistic.”[72]

Some people say you never know what the future will bring. But for most people prior to European domination, the future didn’t bring anything, the future left people alone. The future was made uncertain by the Medicis in order to legalize interest. After a few centuries of capitalization, though, a few aspects of subsequence do seem rather certain. If the growth of wealth continues to be the organizing principle of dominant societies, there will continue to be greater exploitation of the planet’s resources and people. And it is fairly certain (barring any unforeseen miracles) that exploitation cannot be carried out indefinitely. There must be replenishment.

Does Fredric Jameson’s end of the world mean the end of humanity? In the field of Black Studies many scholars have suggested that the category “humanity,” as a means of delineating who (or what) is subject to authorized violence, needs to be retired.[73] It is a category which claims to determine who (or what) can be dominated. As Kodwo Eshun writes, “There’s this sense of the human as being a really pointless and treacherous category, a category which has never meant anything to African-Americans.”[74]

Much as Kallis has pointed out that one way or another, growth must come to an end, “humanity” seems to be on a similar trajectory.[75] As former Facebook president and current billionaire Sean Parker once said: “Because I’m a billionaire, I’m going to have access to better health care so. . . . I’m going to be like 160 and I’m going to be part of this, like, class of immortal overlords. Because, you know the [Warren Buffett] expression about compound interest. . . . Give us billionaires an extra hundred years and you’ll really know what . . . wealth disparity looks like.[76] Sean Parker is not a human. He is a billionaire.

Losing Interest

In his study of twenty-first-century energy consumption, anthropologist Dominic Boyer succinctly captures our current trajectory: “The eschatology of the Anthropocene suggests that the further pursuit of growth . . . points only deathward.”[77] The unavoidable conclusion is that producing and consuming less is the only way to avoid the direst of climate crises. However, the doom unleashed by the ongoing climate crisis seems oddly boring. To this end, Heather Swanson writes of “the banality of the Anthropocene” and Bernard Stiegler offers a Neganthropocene characterized by a resigned nihilism.[78] The end of the world is the copious energy and water required for chatbots to write college papers or create images of Pope Francis in a Balenciaga jacket. Very boring stuff.

Keynes operated blissfully outside this eschatological impulse. His writing is infused with a delusional optimism “In the long run . . . mankind is solving its economic problem. I would predict that the standard of life in the progressive countries one hundred years hence will be between four and eight times as high as it is today.”[79] Like many of his generation, he worried that people in his future would have too much free time. Despite his advocacy for continued inequitable EuroAmerican-led wealth accumulation, Keynes is often held up as a sympathetic figure among the left-leaning because he advocated for worker protections and government stimulus—anti-liberalism policies. But Keynes was very much a wealth accumulator, believing that if we just accumulate enough wealth, it will solve all our problems.

This belief remains dominant across today’s political spectrum. Nearly all demographics believe something like the idea that we could solve all our problems if we just had more money, bigger budgets, more supplies. Well, we have been exponentially growing wealth for two hundred years. We don’t need more money to solve our problems. We can’t stop growing money! The problem is that resources are currently distributed in such a way that stopping economic growth induces widespread poverty if not starvation. This is not some natural law of human behavior. It’s a form of social organization that is only a few centuries old. We have accumulated unGodly amounts of wealth—wealth attained by betting against God

—yet a billion people cannot be sufficiently fed.

After 2008, there is increasing awareness that the situation isn't getting better. Patricia Reed suggests the only way out of our capitalized death spiral is to "drain the ideology of its legitimacy."[80] This chapter has suggested that early-twentieth century avant-garde science, art, and philosophy made a valiant effort to drain capitalist ideology of its legitimacy. Unfortunately, two world wars were fought to teach the world not to question the legitimacy of capitalism. Capitalism is the most heavily armed ideology of all time.

There is the accelerationist philosophy that suggests the only way out of capitalism is through it—that is, by speeding up the rate of technological innovation and production. The intuition here is appreciable, but it is unclear whether our species or planet will make it to the other side of capitalism. "Nothing human makes it out of the near-future."[81]

The solution to our death spiral doesn't appear to be in the capitalized future. The answer, though, cannot be in retrogressing. Backward there are only more cycles and revolutions. As much as this book has bemoaned the trajectory of modernity, the answers are not in the past. Without answers in the past or the future, we must step outside the teleolyptic trajectory of accumulation. Get out of history. After the Renaissance, "humanity recognized itself as making history."[82] Perhaps the solution is to unmake history.

What is necessary sounds impossible. We need the world to be different, but we need it to stop changing. We need to make new ideas that the future can't have. How do we make changes without adding to the accumulative terrors of data and history? How do we make a difference without change? How do we alter the world without making history?

There's no satisfying solution to this riddle, but following the premise laid out in this chapter—that the future has been an invention of capitalizing impulses since the fifteenth century—perhaps the best answer is to *forget the future.* Or most saliently, we need to *lose interest in the future* (in more ways than one). Adherence to the regime of interest locks us into the current troubling economic order. The structural changes needed to avert

the worst climate catastrophes and end exploitative labor practices cannot occur without challenging the normality of interest and the economic growth it mandates.

Jean-Paul Sartre's "counter-finality" might be helpful here. This idea highlights the allure of pursuing ends and means that are at cross-purposes. If we want less poverty, we need to make less money! If we want our unborn grandchildren to inherit a habitable climate, we must stop caring about the future! Counter-finality is antagonistic to human undertakings, it foils human striving, it *is* unanticipated consequences.[83] Given that humans are locked into the anticipation of perpetual economic growth, how can we *un*-anticipate this world? Counter-finality offers an alterity where the deviant consequences of past human intentions and actions are unleashed, where the expectation of wealth takes a wrong turn and gets lost. Appropriately, counter-finality has been described as the alternate universe of Adam Smith's invisible hand.[84] Instead of mass self-interested action leading to common good, counter-finality is the process of collective intention leading to unpredictable individual chaos. Is this chaos the cure for accumulation?

We are trapped in this narrative called history, forcing us into a perpetual loop of beginnings, middles, and ends. We don't get off at the end (we just cycle back). The trajectory needs to recoil. Cause and effect need to be inside-out. The plot needs deforming. The past must be made a poem and the future a figment.

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1 Bear, "Capital," 641, emphasis added.

2 Brian Rotman, *Ad Infinitum—The Ghost in Turing's Machine: Taking God Out of Mathematics and Putting the Body Back In: An Essay in Corporeal Semiotics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

3 E. P. Thompson, "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism" *Past and Present* 38 (1967): 56–97; Maurice Bloch, "The Past and the Present in the Present," *Man* 12, no. 2 (1977): 278–92; Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How*

Anthropology Makes Its Object (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Memoire,” *Representations* 26, no. 1 (1989): 7–24; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); Kevin Birth, *Objects of Time: How Things Shape Temporality* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Lisa Adkins, *The Time of Money* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018); Konings, *Capital and Time*.

4
Jameson, *Postmodernism*.

5 Tanner, *Christianity*, 30.

6 Ewald, “Values,” 130.

7 Adkins, “Speculative,” 449.

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Nina Boy, “The Backstory of the Risk-Free Asset: How Government Debt Became ‘Safe,’“ in *Central Banking at a Crossroads*, eds. Charles Goodhart, Daniela Gabor, Jakob Vestergaard and Ismail Ertürk (London: Anthem Press, 2014), 179.

9 Estimates put the total amount of money in the world at $150 trillion and the global stock market at $127 trillion. (Security Industry and Financial Markets Association, www.sifma.org).

10 Ana Teixeira Pinto, “Capitalism with a Transhuman Face,” *Third Text* 33, no. 3 (2019): 336.

11 Azpilicueta, *On Exchange*, 86.

12 Crucially, European cities and towns continued to experience recurring outbreaks of plague on a decadal scale through the eighteenth century.

13 Le Goff, *Your Money*.

14
Michael Edward Moore, *Nicholas of Cusa and the Kairos of*

Modernity Cassirer, Gadamer, Blumenberg (Brooklyn: Punctum Books, 2013), 77.

15 Most historians speak of European society under Christianity as teleological, pointing to the theological linearity from genesis to eschaton. But I would argue the post-Christian world is just as teleological (or more so), as it explicitly places itself within narrative, history, progress, development, and evolution. The endpoint may not be as definitive as Christianity's apocalypse, but the ostensible trajectory of modern enlightened society is an undeterrable crusade of human reason over the universe.

16 Graeber and Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything*.

17 Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy* (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2020), 37.

18 Reinhart Koselleck, "Modernity and the Planes of Historicity," *Economy and Society* 10, no. 2 (1981): 170.

19 Luxemburg, *Accumulation*, 22.

20 Konings, *Capital and Time*, 30.

21 Konings, *Capital and Time*, 70.

22 Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact: Problems of Knowledge in the Sciences of Wealth and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 62.

23 "Over the last four US presidencies, investment banks like Goldman Sachs have furnished our economic advisors" (LiPuma, *Social Life*, 337).

24 Paul Angelo and David Gevarter, "Who Is Killing Latin America's Environmentalists?" Council on Foreign Relations (2020).

25 Bryan Harris, "Brazil's Brumadinho Dam Disaster

Reverberates for Mining Industry," *Financial Times*, May 14, 2024.
26 Jack Brook, "15 years after Deepwater Horizon oil spill, lawsuits stall and restoration is incomplete," *Associated Press*, April 20, 2025.
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The hyphen here is meant to signify that people were able to make predictions about the future but not necessarily accurately predict the future. "It would seem to make sense to forgo worry about the possibility that present predictions could prove mistaken; they cannot be mistaken because they help in great part to bring about the very future they predict" (Tanner, *Christianity*, 148).
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31 See Pascal's seventeenth-century efforts in machine computation. For critiques of algorithmic governance today, see David Chandler, "Digital Governance in the Anthropocene: The Rise of the Correlational Machine," in *Digital Objects, Digital Subjects*, eds. David Chandler and Christian Fuchs (London: University of Westminster Press, 2019), 23–42; Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).
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Daston, *Classical Probability*, 162–164, emphasis added.
33 Konings, *Capital and Time*, 78–79.
34 Konings, *Capital and Time*, 118.

35 Eich, “Theodicy,” 986.
36 Coleman, “Austerity,” 90.
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Luxemburg, *Accumulation*, 344.
38 Robert Ayres, “The ‘Glorious Revolution’ and the BoE,” in *The History and Future of Economics*, ed. Robert Ayres (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), 57–71.
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The dynamic sciences followed industry from the water mills to the steam engines—the materialization of a future-making machine. Scott W. Schwartz, “The Energy Glitch: Speculative Histories and Quantum Counterfactuals,” *Endeavour* 46, no. 3 (2022): 100836.
40 Tanner, *Christianity*, 136.
41 It remains unclear whether or not F. T. Marinetti was a double-agent working on behalf of future profits (Matthew McLendon, “Engaging the Crowd: The Futurist Manifesto as Avant-Garde Advertisement,” in *Back to the Futurists*, eds. Elza Adamowicz and Simona Storchi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).
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LiPuma, *Social Life*, 240.
44 “There is no global social justice without global cognitive justice” (Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* [London: Routledge, 2015], 42).
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Gesell, *Natural* 50.
46 Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion*, 358.

47 Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1983).

48 Mattick, *Return of Inflation*, 102.

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62 Bear, “Futures,” 153.
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Bookended as we are by inexistence, I'll first rememorize two collaborators no longer among the living. Eric Ng was taken at twenty-two, as we'd just begun brainstorming how best to sonically combine punk and shoegaze. And the most talented Catalan performance philosopher of her generation, Camila Cañeque, left us a Valentine's Day ago. I had the honor of working with her on several projects, notably a *Keine Erotik* atlas of a day in Berlin.

Let's get the fuck out of here.

This book aims to make the normal seem weird (if not dangerous). Such weirding of normality is often more forcefully crystalized by artists, poets, and comedians than academics. Among the most influential to this book have been René Daumal, Samuel Beckett, Etel Adnan, Boris Vian, Ursula K. Le Guin, Norm Macdonald, Michelle Ellsworth, Gregg Turkington, John Lurie, Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, Tristan Tzara, Agnes Varda, Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, Ray Johnson, Heriberto Yépez, Miquel de Palol, Viking Eggeling, Klaus Nomi, Umberto Boccioni, Devin Kenny, Julio Torres, Jean-Luc Godard, and John Kilduff. Of course, the best academics also have

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Turning around to glance under the beginning, I would also like to honor the millions of geniuses and compassionate souls that have been assassinated by the pursuit of endless economic growth over the preceding centuries. It is the ultimate ambition of this book to bring such violence to an end.

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